HUMANITARIAN FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

Research, evidence and guidance

Francesca Bonino with Isabella Jean and Paul Knox Clarke

ALNAP-CDA STUDY

ALNAP is a unique system-wide network dedicated to improving humanitarian performance through increased learning and accountability.
www.alnap.org

CDA focuses on improving the effectiveness of international actors who provide humanitarian assistance, engage in peace practice, and are involved in supporting sustainable development.
www.cdacollaborative.org.

Have you read the **practitioners guidance** that accompanies this study?
www.alnap.org/feedback-loop

Suggested citation
Bonino, F. with Jean, I. and Knox Clarke, P. (2014) **Humanitarian feedback mechanisms: research, evidence and guidance**. ALNAP Study. London: ALNAP/ODI.

ISBN 978-0-9926446-5-9

Copy-edited by Sally Fields-Moss
Typeset by Patricia Curmi

Contents

List of boxes, figures and tables

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the outstanding support of World Vision, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) for having hosted the research team during the field visits in Sudan, Pakistan and Haiti respectively.

From the ALNAP Secretariat, Alexandra Warner provided research assistance, Carry Keay administrative support, while Patricia Curmi and Franziska Orphal led on the communication and design support. We would also like to thank Kim Scriven for his support during to the early stages of this research, and Dayna Brown of CDA, for commenting on various drafts of the study and for her support throughout this initiative.

Acknowledgement of peer reviewers

The authors would like to thank Sajjad Akram (formerly of Save the Children Pakistan), Veronique Barbelet (Humanitarian Policy Group at ODI), Alex Jacobs (Plan International) and Anna Wood (World Vision International) for having acted as peer reviewers of an earlier draft of this study. Their set of comments has been incredibly useful in helping focus and sharpen the analysis contained in this study. Any responsibility for shortcomings, factual errors or misinterpretation rests solely with the authors.

i

Introduction

In 2012 ALNAP and CDA started collaborating on action research looking at feedback mechanisms in humanitarian contexts, to establish what makes them work effectively and to focus on bringing different stakeholders' perspectives – particularly those of crisis-affected people – into the conversation.

The overarching research question was formulated as follows:

which features of feedback mechanisms for affected populations are most likely to contribute to the effectiveness of those mechanisms as perceived by different user groups – including, first and foremost, the crisis-affected communities?

The present study is the culmination of this research and is accompanied by: a method paper (Bonino and Knox Clarke, 2013); a literature review and desk study (forthcoming); and three case studies published separately (Jean with Bonino, 2013; and 2014 forthcoming). The case studies document the experience of three different agencies that use feedback mechanisms as part of their humanitarian programmes and operations: World Vision (WV) in Sudan; the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Shelter Cluster in Pakistan; and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in Haiti.

The insights, observations and evidence generated from the stakeholders throughout the research process are presented and analysed in this study, with the aim of producing evidence-informed guidance for ALNAP Members and agency staff seeking to design and establish new feedback mechanisms, or modify and strengthen the set-up and use of existing ones.

Section I presents a summary of the three country case studies, to document (in real time) different examples of feedback mechanisms established in operational humanitarian contexts. Section II outlines the method used to collect, organise and analyse the data. The aim is to ensure the transparency and 'traceability' of the key steps followed to develop the final guidance. Section III analyses the three case studies to identify which features and characteristics of feedback mechanisms make a plausible contribution to their overall successful functioning. Section IV presents additional observations and insights indicating potential areas for further inquiry. Finally, Section V concludes with a series of pointers about good practice for strengthening the design, set-up and use of feedback mechanisms in humanitarian contexts.

"The aim is to ensure the transparency and 'traceability' of the key steps followed to develop the final guidance."

i.i Background

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

These observations are in line with those from a desk study by CDA (2011) that focused on feedback mechanisms in international assistance organisations and highlighted some of the opportunities, constraints and challenges in gathering and utilising feedback from affected populations. The study showed that there are very few continuous (or closed, completed) feedback loops (CDA, 2011:2), and that affected population feedback mechanisms largely remain an area of emerging research and practice (ibid. 26).

The present research builds on earlier work by IFRC (2005); the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) (2008); the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) (in particular Baños Smith, 2009); Save the Children (Ashraf, Hassan and Akram, 2010); CDA (2011); World Vision (in particular, Levaditis, 2007 and Wood, 2011a and 2011b); and CWS P/A (Raza and Khan, 2011). These works explore some of the recent field-level practices, challenges, emerging guidance and lessons in the area of complaints and feedback handling, while touching on the related (and broader) issues of accountability to affected populations and the quality of humanitarian responses.

This research aims to **complement the existing literature** on feedback mechanisms for affected populations in humanitarian settings by placing a deliberate focus on two key, yet often overlooked, areas of inquiry:

- **Gathering and understanding the views of users of feedback mechanisms**. The users are first and foremost crisis-affected people, but also agency staff with different levels of responsibility for management and decision-making. In this study the research team explored whether users consider feedback mechanisms to be working and in what ways; whether they access and use them; whether they see some features as essential for mechanisms to be effective; and, finally, whether users can suggest ways to improve the mechanisms.
- **Investigating how feedback from affected populations is used, and to what extent** – for instance, is it used to inform decision-making, make changes to programmes and support action to improve the response? Feedback utilisation is crucial if these mechanisms are to improve the humanitarian response and increase accountability to crisis-affected populations[1]. However, as many past studies have found, the fact that feedback is collected does not necessarily mean that it is used (Jacobs, 2010; CDA, 2011; Wood, 2011a and 2011b; Anderson, Brown, Jean, 2012; Twersky et al., 2013).

1 Throughout this study, the terminology 'accountability to affected populations' and 'forward accountability' are used interchangeably. See, for instance, Davies (2007) and Mitchell and Knox Clarke (2011).

Therefore, this work and analysis seek to **identify which features and characteristics make a feedback mechanism effective.** In the context of this research, an effective feedback mechanism is one where feedback from affected populations is collected, acknowledged, documented and receives some form of response.

1

Case studies content overview

Case study visits took place between November 2012 and May 2013 and were hosted by World Vision (WV) in Sudan, IOM in Pakistan and IFRC in Haiti (see Table 1.1 below). The three case studies focus on the feedback mechanisms (FM) for affected populations established by these three agencies. For each of these case studies, the research team was able to collect a full set of information (responses to semi-structured interviews from each of the different stakeholder groups – see method section below).

The ALNAP-CDA team also had the chance to gather more insights and learn from the experiences of other agencies including WFP and Oxfam America in Sudan; Save the Children (SC) in Pakistan; and the Catholic Relief Service (CRS), Haitian Red Cross (HRC), Spanish Red Cross (SRC), British Red Cross (BRC), French Red Cross (FRC) and Canadian Red Cross (CRC) in Haiti. Due to timing and other logistical issues, these agencies could not host a full case study visit, but still wanted to participate and provide input. Their contribution has been presented – often in the form of mini case studies, and boxes with examples of feedback use – in three stand-alone publications featuring case studies from Sudan, Haiti and Pakistan (see Jean with Bonino, 2013).

Table 1.1: feedback mechanisms observed during the three field visits

COUNTRY	Agency visited	Programme the feedback mechanism operates in	Locations visited	Full or mini data set
SUDAN	World Vision, case study host	Food assistance programme	Khartoum; Nyala (South Darfur)	full
SUDAN	WFP	Food assistance programme	Khartoum; Nyala (South Darfur)	mini
SUDAN	Oxfam America	WASH programme	Khartoum; Nyala (South Darfur)	mini
SOMALIA	Danish Refugee Council[2]	CDRD project (Community-Driven Recovery and Development)	Hargeisa (Somaliland); Nairobi (Kenya)	mini

2 The case study hosted by DRC looked primarily at the innovation components of their SMS Feedback System (http://somcdrd.org/hif/) supported by the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF). Because the topics covered were complementary, ALNAP and CDA were able to share with HIF the information and data gathered for the DRC case study. More information about the innovation-specific features of the DRC feedback system is available at: http://www.humanitarianinnovation.org/projects/large-grants/drc-somalia.

COUNTRY	Agency visited	Programme the feedback mechanism operates in	Locations visited	Full / mini data set
PAKISTAN	IOM, case study host	One-Room Shelter programme (ORS)	Islamabad; Hyderabad area (Sindh)	full
	IOM / Shelter Cluster, case study host	Shelter programme and non-food items distribution	Islamabad; Sukkur area; Jacobabad area (North Sindh)	full
	Save the Children	Shelter programme and non-food items distribution	Islamabad; Jacobabad area (North Sindh)	mini
HAITI	IFRC, case study host	IFRC Return and Relocation programme	Port au-Prince; Jacmel	full
	CRS	CRRP Community Resettlement and Rehabilitation programme	Port-au-Prince	mini
	Spanish Red Cross	Livelihoods programme	Leogane	mini
	British Red Cross	Integrated Neighbourhood Approach (INA) programme	Port-au-Prince	mini

Note: The observations and information collected during the field visits were considered enough for a full case study if interviews and focus groups were conducted with: affected populations / aid recipients / programme participants; agency staff in senior management, programme and project management positions; FM gatekeepers (defined later in Section II); staff in service delivery and monitoring positions; and implementing partners (if relevant). Whenever access to programme participants was not possible, and interviews and focus groups have been conducted only with agency staff, the data set was not considered complete, and thus these were called 'mini case studies'.

Section II will tackle a number of methodological questions, including those concerning the scoping decisions. However, it is relevant to highlight here the main factors that informed the choice of case studies and host agencies. Convenience and opportunity played a role, in that host agencies were interested in the topic and available to host the research team, facilitating access to programme sites, staff, and the crisis-affected communities they work with. However, other important factors made WV Sudan, IOM / Shelter Cluster in Pakistan, and IFRC in Haiti ideal choices as case study participants and host agencies:

a) **Learning orientation** – all the organisations that hosted case study visits were inclined to reflect on and learn from their recent (and still unfolding) practices concerning feedback mechanisms. WV, IOM and IFRC saw their engagement in this research as an opportunity to generate some newer evidence and recommendations for enhancing the functioning and performance of their feedback systems. Their engagement also underscores their desire to catalyse learning, and enable peer-to-peer exchange among their staff and partners.

b) **Opportunity to observe the mechanisms in real time** – thanks to the support and facilitation provided by the three case study hosts, the research team was able to observe and document in real time how the feedback mechanisms were working in the programme / operational sites visited. They could interview programme staff and different FM stakeholders, including, most importantly, the affected population, the 'expected users' of such mechanisms.

c) **Option of a wide geographical spread, and operational and contextual diversity** – these were offered by the combination of Sudan, South Darfur (protracted displacement / camp settings); Pakistan, rural Sindh (flood-affected / dispersed community settings); and Haiti, Port-au-Prince and provinces of Leogane and Jacmel (earthquake-affected population / dispersed urban and rural populations).

d) **Good fit with the scoping criteria** for the research (Bonino and Knox Clarke, 2013). See Box 1.1 for details of these.

e) **Available documentation and feedback data** – all three host agencies had already produced some internal and external materials, studies and reports on the broader topic of feedback mechanisms. WV Sudan, for instance, had produced programme-specific guidelines on roles and responsibilities for the different roles in their feedback mechanism (see, for instance, Nyathi, 2008; World Vision, 2008a and 2008b; World Vision, 2009; World Vision Sudan, 2012). IFRC in Haiti had produced studies and reviews of their communication with affected populations since the January 2010 earthquake, looking at how to strengthen two-way communication and gain aid recipients' feedback that could be 'taken on board and used to shape and refine programmes'. (Chazaly, 2011: 8; see also IFRC, 2011 and Monti, 2013).

Based on the materials consulted during the desk-based phase of this work, the research team concluded that, in these three cases, it would be possible to: document decision-making practices based on feedback information; reconstruct the related flow of information; and pinpoint communication patterns with aid recipients, in order to draw some conclusions on the FM effectiveness. It is important to note here that, while this was possible to an extent, the level of decision-making that could be traced and analysed more confidently was at the level of individual activities and, programmes. The researchers could not analyse with the same level of detail how information from feedback mechanisms was used at 'higher' strategic or organization-wide levels. This is an area which remains under-researched and which could be covered in future studies.

Concretely, the case studies were selected after a first call was put out to the ALNAP Membership asking for agencies potentially interested in hosting the research team during the field visit and opening the door to their programme staff and crisis-affected communities. In order to minimise the bias of convenience and self-selection in identifying host agencies, all the ALNAP's members offers for support were filtered by: i) following up with each agency to gather and review available and internal documentation on their feedback handling practices; ii) reviewing available

“Concretely, the case studies were selected after a first call was put out to the ALNAP Membership”

reports and feedback databases excerpts (if available) to make sure that the caseload handled through the FM would fit within the scoping criteria set for this research (e.g. mechanisms dealing exclusively with SEA allegations were excluded – see Box 1.1 below); iii) scheduling the fieldwork to allow the feedback mechanism to be documented working in real time in ongoing humanitarian, early recovery, and recovery operations.

Box 1.1 Scoping criteria to identify the humanitarian feedback mechanisms examined for this research

The scoping criteria called for the selected feedback mechanisms cases to:

- operate at project, service delivery, programme implementation level;
- operate in the context of on-going humanitarian operations or humanitarian programming, but not necessarily in the immediate phases of relief and response after a sudden-onset crisis;
- aim at adjusting and improving some elements of the actions carried out and services delivered;
- aim at dealing with a broad caseload of non-sensitive issues (feedback) in addition to sensitive ones (complaints). Mechanisms designed exclusively to address sexual exploitation and abuse allegations were excluded, on the assumption that they may require special design 'features' (such as mechanisms to allow for the collection of evidence that could be used in legal processes) and might address issues of acknowledgement of feedback, validation and anonymity / confidentiality in very specific ways.

Source: Adapted from Bonino and Knox Clarke (2013:7–8)

1.1 Case study 1: 'We are Committed to Listen to You':[3] World Vision's experience with humanitarian feedback mechanisms in Darfur

"The case describes the feedback collection channels used in WV's feedback mechanism"

This case study primarily focuses on the feedback processes in World Vision Sudan's food assistance programme in South Darfur camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). The research team conducted interviews with World Vision staff in Khartoum and Nyala and residents in Otash, Alsalam, and Kalma camps. The case describes the feedback collection channels used in WV's feedback mechanism and highlights examples of small and on-going adjustments during project implementation, and more significant programme modifications that have been made using feedback data. In many cases, feedback data was supplemented by additional monitoring data gained before a response or action was taken. The study covered the following

3 'We are committed to listen to you' is the catchphrase written in both English and Arabic painted on a suggestion box WV placed in a temporary school in an IDPs camp outside Nyala in South Darfur.

communication tools and channels for capturing solicited and unsolicited feedback:

- Community Help Desk (CHD) is the primary channel through which World Vision Sudan gains feedback from camp residents about its food assistance. CHDs function in all camps where WV has distributed food assistance since 2010. CHDs are staffed by two 'focal points' – unpaid camp residents selected by a committee of fellow camp residents and World Vision staff. They are given training and use a logbook to record requests, complaints and feedback from affected populations during monthly food distributions. CHD focal points are encouraged to resolve simple questions on the spot. The logbook is transferred to the Food Assistance Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) team where eight assistants process and analyse data. All data from CHD logbooks is regularly summarised and shared with the Food Assistance Team and senior management in Khartoum. Camp residents also approach CHD focal points between monthly food distributions and submit written notes to be included in CHD logbooks.
- Feedback boxes (suggestion boxes) are also used by the Food Assistance Team to gather feedback. The boxes are typically located outside the temporary school buildings where WV runs school feeding programmes. World Vision staff open the boxes in the presence of the principal, staff and pupils. A pre-printed form invites the pupils and teachers at the school to provide suggestions, feedback and complaints about World Vision programmes and staff conduct. Users can remain anonymous and responses are given through school-wide announcements and also individually.
- A number of informal channels for capturing feedback, requests and complaints from camp residents include periodic community meetings and focus group discussions conducted by staff from the food assistance programme and other programme units (health, WASH, child-friendly spaces, etc.). Regular post-distribution monitoring visits provide additional opportunities for IDPs to feed back. Beyond the food assistance programme, children's committees use community meetings to facilitate educational and recreational activities and encourage feedback from children using drawings. Camp leaders and residents have also used phone calls and office visits to raise questions and issues with staff.

There are links between the different feedback channels. For example, when local community mobilisers hear of issues related to food rations and nutrition they pass this feedback on to CHD focal points so that the proper WV team will record them and follow them up. Feedback is documented in logbooks and questions are answered on the spot as much as possible. When feedback requires a response or action by the World Vision team, staff respond in both written and verbal form and, where appropriate, make announcements at meetings with the community and with camp leadership about the changes that have been made or action steps in progress.

The case study underscores two design-related points that have implications for effectiveness of feedback mechanisms. First, much of the literature on feedback processes emphasises the cultural appropriateness of the feedback channel itself. The Darfur case study points to the importance of taking both the local culture and the context (i.e. operational, security, phase of programming, institutional) into account to ensure an appropriate and effective mechanism. The second aspect, which receives a lot less attention in the literature and programme documents, is the importance of correctly locating the feedback mechanism in the organisational structure, and ensuring integration into other organisational systems.

World Vision has used feedback from IDPs in Darfur to modify and improve programme design and implementation. Some changes have been small and approved at the sub-office level; others have been more significant modifications in the delivery of food assistance and have required the approval of WV senior management, WV's Food Programming Management Group (FPMG) and WFP.

Among the examples of changes that have been made to programmes based on feedback from camp residents are the following:

- changes to the content of food rations
- structural improvements in the food distribution areas and temporary school buildings
- enhanced extracurricular programming for children
- introduction of a milling voucher programme.

"Darfur is characterised by ongoing conflict and restricted access to certain camps and regions."

Darfur is characterised by ongoing conflict and restricted access to certain camps and regions. In addition, certain areas of programming are proscribed due to the unresolved conflict and the dilemma of protracted displacement. For example, construction of permanent structures, including school buildings in the IDP camps, is prohibited by the Sudanese Government. World Vision staff regularly receive feedback, complaints and requests that go beyond the remit of their programming or the permitted scope of operations. For example, camp sheiks and residents continue to file requests for permanent school buildings and clinics, and the staff continue to explain the limitations under which they operate and what has already been done to remedy the situation (e.g. temporary school buildings). This type of feedback, which goes beyond tweaking at project implementation level, is typically shared at coordination meetings and with the Humanitarian Country Team, but the researchers were unable to investigate the extent of documentation and action taken based on such requests.

1.2 Case study 2: "Investing in listening": IOM's experience of feedback mechanisms in Pakistan

This case study primarily focuses on feedback processes in IOM's shelter programme in the flood-affected regions of Pakistan and, by extension, feedback activities in the Shelter Cluster led by IOM. The research team conducted interviews with IOM programme staff, Shelter Cluster focal points and IOM's implementing partners in Islamabad, North Sindh and South Sindh provinces, where IOM is providing assistance in flood-affected communities. Conversations included community members who have received assistance since the floods of 2010, 2011 and 2012 in several rural areas of North and South Sindh.

The following tools and channels for capturing solicited and unsolicited feedback were observed and described in the case study:

Humanitarian Call Centre

The Humanitarian Call Centre (HCC) is IOM's primary feedback and complaints channel. It is based in Islamabad, runs 8 am to 5 pm during weekdays and has nationwide coverage. It is used in 30 districts where IOM operates. HCC's purpose is to establish a direct channel for communication between IOM and the people supported by its programmes. HCC staff are trained to provide basic information to affected populations about IOM projects, i.e. how aid recipients are prioritised and the criteria used to determine areas for intervention. The toll-free number for the call centre is distributed widely through stickers attached to assistance packages such as winterisation kits. People are encouraged to call with complaints and feedback related to any assistance programme – in particular if they detect fraud or mismanagement by local implementing partners or unfair selection and distribution. Call centre staff are able to respond to some queries immediately. The HCC refers all complaints / feedback to IOM, where they are handled by appropriate programme teams.

Typically, M&E staff and Shelter Cluster focal points verify and investigate complaints that are urgent and sensitive. These may include allegations of fraud, staff misconduct, problems with vendors, and incident reports. They are forwarded to district-level IOM programme managers who in turn ask a dedicated IOM M&E staff person in the field to investigate the complaints and to report back to management. Complaints alleging exclusion from affected population lists and misconduct are prioritised and trigger a verification visit within 72 hours. Specific timelines are agreed on to resolve sensitive issues. Complaints about distribution of relief items and eligibility are documented and the Islamabad Head Office tracks verification and response. This is done by requesting investigation reports from field staff, with photographs and written affidavits from complainants that the issue has been resolved.

Monitoring teams

Through the work of their monitoring teams IOM supports data analysis, verification and follow-up of the complaints and feedback received through the call centre and through the monitoring process itself. Overall, IOM's M&E team oversees collection of all data related to its ongoing programmes and incorporates information from the Shelter Cluster focal points. IOM monitors typical implementation activities such as the aid recipients' selection process (verifying that the implementing partners select people who indeed meet IOM's vulnerability criteria); cash transfers, construction progress and quality as part of its One-Room Shelter programme; relief item distribution; and technical assistance and administrative / fiscal procedures related to implementing partners. M&E teams carry out needs assessment visits, vulnerability assessments, baseline data collection and impact assessments. Within this broader M&E mandate, the team is also responsible for verification, investigation (when necessary) and response to the bulk of the complaints received through HCC, post-distribution monitoring visits, partners, Shelter Cluster visits and liaison with authorities.

Shelter cluster coordination mechaisms and focal points

Shelter Cluster coordination mechanisms and focal points (not IOM staff, but coordinated by IOM) are deployed at the district level to ensure timely and reliable mapping of needs and to share activities and information with operational agencies, the Cluster System and district, provincial and national authorities. The proximity of the focal points to the affected communities, implementing agencies and local authorities enables the cluster to continuously assess needs and verify gaps in coverage. The cluster focal points see the provision and sharing of information, including gathering feedback and passing it on to partners and cluster members, as central to their coordination role. There is no formal feedback mechanism at the cluster level and hence no explicit complaints / feedback / response mechanism. Instead, local people use several informal channels, including sharing feedback in face-to-face conversations with focal points and sending SMS to Shelter Cluster focal points. When possible, focal points provide clarification on selection and vulnerability criteria. Complaints and feedback documented during community visits and those that occasionally arrive through SMS or phone calls are communicated to the relevant agencies directly and through the Cluster System.

A distinctive feature in the Pakistan case study is the role of the Shelter Cluster in sharing feedback and enabling feedback loops. At the time of the field visit, there was no explicit or formalised feedback mechanism across the cluster system in Pakistan or within any particular cluster. However, it became evident from our conversations in Sindh and Islamabad that the deep presence of the Shelter Cluster at the district level, and the day-to-day work of the cluster focal points who routinely share information during coordination meetings and by communicating with operational agencies at the district and national level, are notable features that enable and enhance feedback activities.

IOM's overall response, implementation process and specific procedures have been modified as a result of a steady stream of feedback arriving through the call centre and through monitoring visits and face-to-face conversations with community members. The changes that IOM has instituted based on analysis of feedback include:

- modifications to the contents of emergency kits
- adjustments in cash transfer procedures
- changes in payment amounts and payment schedule in the One-Room Shelter programme.

All of these changes have been communicated to people through community meetings, announcements, or face-to-face interaction with local partners and staff. Some changes, such as adjustments to cash transfer amounts and procedures, were made during transition from one programme phase to another and people were informed during communal meetings.

Aid recipients' feedback, together with other information coming, for instance, from survey data and targeted field visits, was used for reflection (including at the level of the Humanitarian Country Team) and advocacy on issues of land ownership and property titling.

1.3 Case study 3: Affected population communication tools and feedback channels used by IFRC Haiti

The third case study focuses on communication and feedback processes for affected populations used within the IFRC's programme on return and relocation as well as their sanitation and health programming. The research team conducted interviews with programme staff at IFRC and several other RCRC (Red Cross and Red Crescent) national societies that operate in Port-au-Prince, Leogane and Jacmel and support earthquake-affected people with a resettlement grant to cover one year's rent and a livelihoods grant. The programme has helped many people move out from the crowded camps and into safe housing. IFRC's global focus is typically on two-way communication and is expressed in commitments and practical action to enhance communication channels with affected populations.

The case study observed and described several communication tools and channels for capturing solicited and unsolicited feedback. Several of these channels serve a dual purpose of information provision and gathering of feedback (and also questions and information requests). The main tools and channels were as follows:

Toll-free call line

Toll-free call line for questions and complaints – 'Noula' (translated from creole as 'We are Here'). Noula is an external call centre whose staff are trained to answer questions, provide up-to-date information on payment schedules and community meetings and document incoming complaints and feedback. The bulk of the feedback is about IFRC's Return and Relocation programme and its entitlements and project activities.

> **"Before Noula we did not know how to talk to the Red Cross."**
>
> Resident of Afca camp in Port-au-Prince

Telefon Kwa Woui

Telefon Kwa Wouj ('Red Cross Telephone')[4] is a toll-free SMS-based interactive phone line with pre-recorded messages about public health, hygiene, disaster preparedness and violence prevention. Telefon Kwa Wouj also periodically invites and incentivises callers to take quizzes to test their understanding and knowledge of the information shared through the Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system accessed by calling the phone line. Feedback questions are included in the phone-based automated survey as well. A database is maintained by the Beneficiary Communications Team at IFRC and the initial data analysis is performed by an analytics firm in Canada. Data from the IVR system is used to inform health and DRR programming and to modify the IVR messaging on critical health and disaster preparedness topics.

Radio Kwa Wouj

Radio Kwa Wouj ('Radio Red Cross') broadcasts several hours a week with a live call-in show featuring distinguished doctors and experts on specific health and sanitation topics and allows people to call in with questions and concerns.

4 In case this is helpful for your table on usage – the Telefon Kwa Wouj broke the 1 million barrier just 9 months and 28 days after being launched.

Feedback solicited through ongoing programme activities

Feedback solicited through ongoing programme activities and monitoring processes. As part of IFRC's routine monitoring processes, the Return and Relocation programme staff conduct *visites bien être* – well-being visits to programme participants who have identified safe and affordable housing to move into and have resettled. Up to three visits are conducted, usually at set intervals, and an 'exit interview' in the form of a focus group discussion with a sample of participants typically also takes place. These processes are facilitated by staff and generate both quantitative and qualitative data.

Traditional methods

IFRC and its national counterpart Haitian Red Cross continue to rely on traditional methods of both conveying information and seeking people's input and feedback. Community mobilisation remains a cornerstone of the Haitian Red Cross approach and mostly involves volunteers visiting many communities on foot to engage face-to-face with community members and listen to their concerns and questions, as well as sharing critical announcements and programme details.

A distinctive feature in the Haiti case study is the use of information and communication technology such as TERA and IVR to enhance and expand feedback activities. IFRC has invested extensively in developing communication tools and accountability mechanisms in Haiti. It is the only country where IFRC can afford to support this work to a significant extent and where there is dedicated funding to resource it. Funding was allocated to create the position of Evaluation, Accountability and Learning Movement Coordinator, whose responsibilities include coordinating the IFRC Performance and Accountability Working Group (PAWG) and sharing learning on feedback and accountability mechanisms. PAWG consists of accountability focal points in all RCRC societies working in Haiti.

> **"Due to the nature of humanitarian response, there is a loss of institutional memory."**

IFRC's process for absorbing feedback and acting on it has been iterative from the start. It is recognised that, due to the nature of humanitarian response, there is a loss of institutional memory about the important changes that have been made based on feedback over the last few years. IFRC staff shared with the ALNAP-CDA team a number of examples of use of feedback in adjusting programmes and making decisions:

- The initial design of the Return and Relocation programme was informed by a steady stream of feedback from camp residents who spoke to IFRC delegates and shared the details of their living arrangements prior to the 2010 earthquake.
- Temporary shelters that IFRC constructed were redesigned to include more than one door and a veranda. This improved design has been institutionalised.
- Types of construction materials were changed due to leakages and complaints from households.
- The content and messaging function of the Interactive Voice Response system was adjusted based on user data analytics and feedback from users.
- IFRC's national counterpart, the Haitian Red Cross, adjusted the content for the Health Department sensitisation campaign based on the survey data gleaned from the IVR system.

1.4 Additional example from DRC's work in Somalia with SMS feedback

In 2011 the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) funded the Danish Refugee Council in Somalia to work on an initiative to strengthen peer-to-peer accountability and accountability to affected populations in the context of remote management. The main tool developed to support this was an open-source application / software for an SMS Feedback System that the affected populations / aid recipients could access by texting a DRC number. They would also receive regular updates via SMS from DRC staff on the status of their pending case or on their feedback. In early 2013 DRC hosted a short ALNAP–HIF field visit in Somalia to look at this feedback system and its innovation components. Some of the main highlights are outlined in the box below.

"In early 2013 DRC hosted a short ALNAP–HIF field visit in Somalia."

Box 1.2 DRC's experience with the SMS Feedback System in Somalia

The DRC Feedback and Accountability System received funding from HIF to develop and test the platform across Somalia, focusing on crisis-affected communities' experiences of a community-driven reconstruction project in Somaliland and Puntland, but later expanding to emergency cash-transfers distributed in Mogadishu.[5] Initially the project aimed to gather feedback through text messages which would be complemented by social media. This latter component was less successful and was not sustained. The SMS feedback component was better used. It should be noted that the SMS Feedback System was kept separate from the DRC's complaint hotline and was run as follows.

Recipients' SMS feedback was collected, logged, referred and responded to using free, open-source technology. Participants sent their feedback to a local Somali number by mobile phone. Where SMS feedback was flagged as a complaint, it was referred to the relevant focal point. When positive, neutral or non-sensitive feedback was received, this would be manually forwarded to a relevant staff member. A response was made by text message if the information was non-sensitive and short; otherwise, the user was called directly.

5 More information about the innovation-specific features of the DRC feedback system is available at: www.humanitarianinnovation.org/projects/large-grants/drc-somalia.

Box 1.2 (cont.) DRC's experience with the SMS Feedback System in Somalia

The message and DRC's response were then plotted on an online map according to theme and location, using the Ushahidi platform.[6] Whatever the nature of the feedback, the follow-up process and the response can be seen online (only showing non-distinguishing personal details: the individual's gender, location, and project).

The starting point for DRC's innovation was a deep-rooted understanding of the Somali context and its operational and security constraints. It was also recognised that mobile technologies offered potential solutions – particularly regarding access and accountability in a remote management context. From the outset, the organisation involved programming specialists and technologists based in Somalia who were familiar with the local telecommunications context and existing web platforms. The added value of the online platform[7] was that individual feedback messages could be aggregated and tracked, which can generate information important for improving project management (including, for example, instances where communities appear to know relatively little about programme activities). Also, communication officers did significant work to promote and explain the feedback channel on a face-to-face basis. This played a crucial role in managing expectations, not only about the projects but also the goals and capacity of the channel itself[8].

Source: Adapted from Scriven (2013)

1.5 How much feedback?

The case study summaries underscore not only the variety of their designs, set-ups, tools and channels, but also the different scales and capacity required to handle feedback. Feedback mechanisms have to handle varying volumes of feedback and may require follow-up on an individual basis, or with entire groups.

Gathering detailed information about how often feedback channels are accessed, and by whom, by how many and by what categories of people (men, women, children, elderly, etc.) proved challenging. Each agency has its own practices for collecting and recording this kind of information. Because the mechanisms' set-ups are so diverse, comparing the number of feedback items and entries handled may not prove valuable. Moreover, this research the team did not examine the relationship between scale and outreach of feedback systems, user access and overall effectiveness. The researchers suggest this question for future study, perhaps starting with examining different programmes from the same agency, using comparable feedback channels.

6 Ushahidi is an open-source project which allows users to gather information from a large, unspecified group of people using multiple channels, including SMS, email, Twitter and the Internet. Developed in Kenya in 2008 to map the spread of post-election violence in the country, it has been used to crowdsource information in a range of settings, including a number of political and humanitarian crises, notably after the Haiti earthquake.

7 The platform can be viewed at somcdrd.org/hif/.

8 A summary of the discussion with a DRC Communications Officer for Accountability can be viewed here: crisismapper.wordpress.com/2012/06/18/the-very-first-humanitarian-customer-calling-center/.

To give a sense of such diversity in scale and number, below is a snapshot of some of the numerical information retrieved during this research process.

Table 1.2 How much feedback? Overview of some of the numerical data reported by agencies

What tools and channels are used?	How many access points are there for feedback submission?	How often can feedback be collected / submitted?	How often are users contacted with updates after they give feedback?	How many participants accessed the FM?
Community Help Desk logbook (WV Sudan)	2 CHD focal points per distribution point (volunteer IDP) assisted by a committee at field-level (consists of CHD focal points, Distribution Team Leader and Senior Sheikhs) [CHD system runs at all 43 food distribution points]	Monthly / follows the calendar of food distribution [feedback summary reports for management compiled on a monthly basis]	Monthly; follows the calendar of food distribution. During the queuing time at food distribution sites, the WV Distribution Team Leader update aid recipients and IDP camp residents on follow up to feedback received, which actions have been taken, or not taken, and for which reason.	131 complaints /suggestions received/ filed in March 2012 NB: only 29 food distribution points were active during this month)
Comment / Feedback box installed in temporary schools (IPD camp setting) WV Suda	1 suggestion / comment box installed in each temporary school	ongoing	No precise data. Suggestion box emptied monthly Feedback responses are communicated back during periodic monitoring visits and using parent and teacher meeting.	around 100 feedback/ comment sheets per month
Shelter Cluster focal point system (Pakistan)	1 Shelter Cluster focal point per district, supervised by Shelter Cluster lead person at provincial-level. [Sindh province had 6 focal points]	Continuous / part of cluster coordination and field monitoring functions at provincial, district and sub-district levels	Continuous / part of cluster coordination and field monitoring functions at provincial, district and sub-district levels	no precise data

What tools and channels are used?	How many access points are there for feedback submission?	How often can feedback be collected / submitted?	How often are users contacted with updates after they give feedback?	How many participants accessed the FM?
IOM Humanitarian Communications' Humanitarian Call Centre (HCC)	1 call centre in Islamabad, nationwide coverage [used in the 30 districts where IOM operated]	Call Centre operates 8 am to 5 pm on weekdays and is accessed through a toll free number. HCC provides information, registers complaints and facilitates case referrals. [logs are consolidated into a central database and forwarded to four senior programme staff]	Complaints alleging exclusion from aid recipients lists and misconduct prioritised; verification visit to occur within 72 hours. After investigation, IOM takes all possible steps to inform concerned community members who raised the issue before the matter is closed. Sub-office level Programme Managers regularly report to Islamabad management on remedial actions taken.	In Fall 2013, average number of calls per month was 100- 120. Annual average for the last two years – 1400 calls. The number of calls is expected to rise because HComms has recently been revitalized in IDP camps in KP – FATA provinces.
Noula (IFRC Haiti) www.noula.ht (last accessed 5 December 2013)	Website, toll-free number and SMS sent to Noula platform [covers all sites where IFRC works] Accessed by most people through at toll-free number.	Continuous	Report run weekly by Beneficiary Communication Team [60-70% of questions are responded to by call centre staff and do not need to be transferred to Red Cross staff]	1400 calls in first year of call centre (Port-au-Prince only), 100% resolved From Jan.2011 to Jan.2013 37,017 messages have been received
DRC SMS-based feedback mechanism somcdrd.org/hif/reports (accessed 4 December 2013)	The mechanism relied on aid recipients possessing their own cell phone to get in contact with DRC. (There is high mobile penetration rate in the area covered by the programme across Somalia, particularly Somaliland and Puntland)	Continuous	no precise data	from Nov.2011 to Sept. 2013: 363 programme / project-related feedback items handled; 42 complaints.

Source: Authors' compilation

2

Research methodology

This section outlines the key steps taken to develop the methodology for this study, starting with the choice of research design and concluding with a discussion of the approach to analyse the information collected. These steps are summarised in the table below.

Table 2.1: Overview of the key research method steps followed

Key research components	Steps followed
Deciding on a research design	Choosing a case-based research design (Para. 2.1)
Clarifying what to consider as a 'case' in a case-based approach	Defining the 'case': identifying what constitutes a feedback mechanism (Para 2.2)
Outlining the overall research plan	Clarifying the research plan based on the research question to answer (Para 2.3)
Gathering information	• Identifying who should provide information for the case studies (Para. 2.4) • Deriving a set of seven propositions to test (Para. 2.5) • Clarifying the meaning of effectiveness of a feedback mechanism (Para. 2.6) • Developing a protocol for field-level data collection (Para. 2.7)
Organising and analysing information	• Analysing the case studies: A three-step process (para. 2.8) • Synthesising information from each case (para. 2.9) • Comparing the three case studies to identify patterns (Para. 2.10)

Source: Authors

2.1 Choosing a case-based research design

This research is qualitative in nature and has adopted a case-based design. Such designs are often chosen for their ability to combine the search for cause-and-effect connections along with explanations for 'how' and 'why' questions. Case study inquiries often provide a good fit for the exploration of contemporary issues in real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon of interest and the context are not clear (Yin, 2009: 18). Much of the explanatory power of case study research rests on the logic followed in:

- identifying what qualifies as a 'case' in the case-based inquiry, including defining the boundaries of case studies, and the relevant unit of analysis;
- establishing the data collection strategy, including the data collection protocol;
- analysing case study data (see, for instance, Yin, 2009: Ch. 5; and Gerring, 2012: Parts II and III).

This section outlines the steps taken to fulfil these three key requirements to allow key decisions that have informed the development of the study and related guidance to be traced. As well as being in line with some general principles on assessing the quality of research evidence (see Box 2.1 below), this also offers other researchers a way of experimenting further with this approach to gathering and analysing data on features that contribute to FM effectiveness.

Box 2.1 Guiding principles to assess the quality of research evidence

The following principles have been deemed in the literature to be abstract enough to apply to a range of qualitative research approaches. The research should be:

- contributory in advancing wider knowledge or understanding about policy, practice, theory or a particular substantive field
- defensible in design by providing a research strategy that can address the evaluative and research-focused questions posed
- rigorous in conduct through the systematic and transparent collection, analysis and interpretation of qualitative data
- credible in claim through offering well-founded and plausible arguments about the significance of the evidence generated.

Source: Adapted from Spencer et al. (2003:7)

2.2 Defining the 'case': Identifying what constitutes a feedback mechanism

A review of the relevant literature uncovered different (but often only partially exhaustive) definitions of feedback mechanisms in humanitarian practice, as well as different accounts of the scope of work, purpose and benefits expected from them.

Moreover, most of the literature available on the subject tends to either examine

> "Most of the literature available on the subject tends to examine complaints and feedback mechanisms together"

complaints and feedback mechanisms together, or include a discussion on feedback handling as part of various strands of literature on:

- complaints and SEA handling processes. See Box 2.2 below. Useful references are found in: IASC PSEA Task Force, 2011; Baños Smith, 2009; and DRC, 2008
- accountability to affected populations and field-level accountability practices (see, for instance, Levaditis, 2007; Srodecki, 2008; Gostelow et al., 2010; Darcy, Kiani and Alexander, 2013)
- monitoring practices (see, for instance, IFRC, 2011)
- communication with affected populations in crisis settings (Wall, with Chéry, 2011; Nelson, Sigal and Zambrano, 2011; OCHA, 2013; Chapelier and Shah, 2013)
- listening to affected people on the receiving end of aid (Anderson, Brown, Jean, 2012)
- perception issues in humanitarian action (Abu-Sada, 2012)
- affected communities' participation in, and ownership of, emergency, recovery and development programmes (see, for instance, Levaditis, 2007; HAP, 2010).[9]

Because feedback mechanisms were seldom investigated in their own right, the research team found it difficult to find a clear, common definition of feedback mechanisms. Therefore, at the outset of the research the following working definition was proposed:

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

Box 2.2 Guiding principles to assess the quality of research evidence

Some segments of the literature on feedback in humanitarian contexts tend to examine it together with procedures handling complaints (including gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA)). This can be somewhat problematic because whereas on the one hand there can be some overlap between feedback and complaints handling systems (for instance feedback collection channels may be used to submit a complaint and viceversa), there is also some rationale for keeping them separate and developing different sets of guidance for the two types of systems.

9 The HAP Principle of 'participation and informed consent' talks of 'listening and responding to feedback from crisis-affected people when planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programmes…' (HAP, 2010b:9).

Box 2.2 (cont.) Guiding principles to assess the quality of research evidence

One of the arguments that can be made for keeping feedback and complaints systems separated is that the latter need to be designed, maintained, and supported to handle very specific type of information including: i) GBV and SEA allegations; ii) grave allegations of agency staff or implementing partners' misconduct, fraud, embezzlements or other abuses that, if true, would amount to violations of agencies' staff code of conduct requiring disciplinary sanctions; and iii) allegations of violations that, if true, would amount to crimes under national law or other applicable legal frameworks.

A practical repercussion of the differences between feedback complaints and SEA allegations is that the need to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, and allow for appeal and redress, is more pressing in the case of complaints and SEA allegations than it generally is for feedback.

The specific (and often very sensitive) type of caseload addressed by complaints and SEA mechanisms called for humanitarian agencies to codify the procedures and requirements needed to establish and support such systems. In particular, protection against SEA and GBV has, in recent years, attracted high levels of attention and has been the focus of sensitisation and awareness-raising actions at both single and inter-agency levels. Under the aegis of both the UN Secretary General, and the IASC, several agencies have collaborated to develop and pilot specific guidance, training, awareness-raising and M&E tools on these issues. (See, for instance, IASC AAP/PSEA Task Team 2013; IASC AAP/PSEA Task Team 2012b.) In particular, the Secretary-General's Bulletin on Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (ST/SGB/2003/13)[10] issued in 2003 has been instrumental in giving the impetus to focus agencies' attention on these issues, and develop specific guidance on how to communicate, raise awareness, monitor, and follow up SEA allegations.

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

At the same time, it is important to note that mechanisms designed expressly to address sensitive complaints may also attract other types of feedback (particularly where they are the sole feedback mechanism available) and that general feedback mechanisms may also be used to transmit information about SEA or other serious abuses. Mechanisms – formal and otherwise – should be available to address all types of feedback and have necessary referral procedures in place.

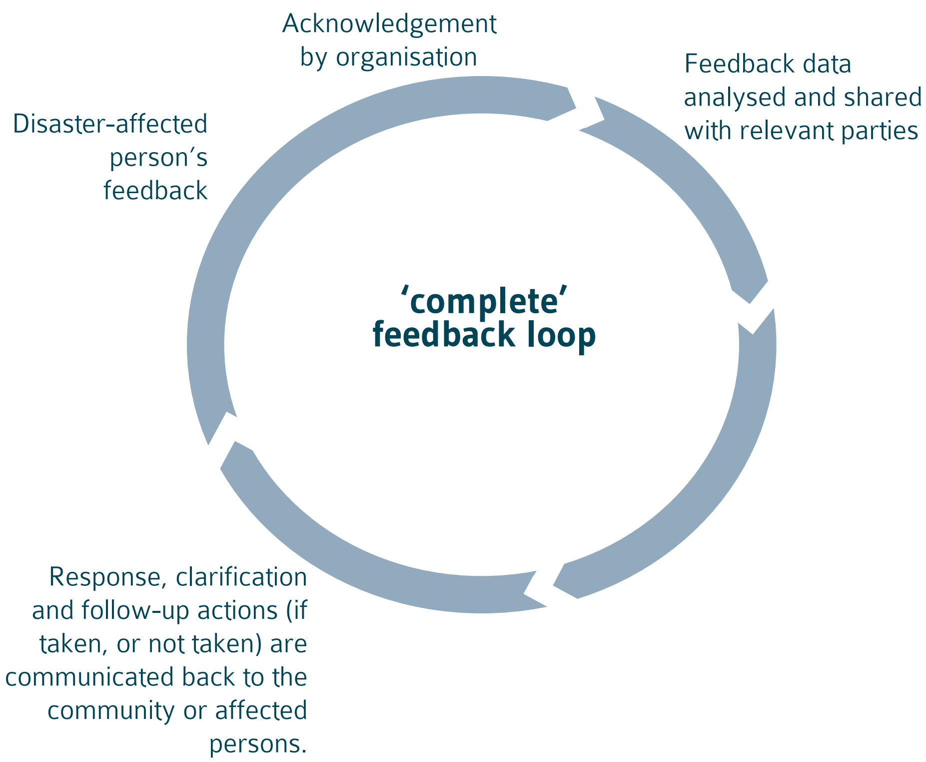
This research does not, however, aim to make specific recommendations on whether these should be single or multiple mechanisms, or on how feedback mechanisms can address issues of serious abuse.

Source: Authors

10 A complete repository of resources (from UN and NGOs) on this issue is available at the dedicated PSEA task force website on: http://www.un.org/en/pseataskforce/tools_engage.shtml.

Figure 2.1 suggests a possible visualisation of a simplified complete feedback loop that captures some of the generic steps in the feedback process, including collection, acknowledgment and verification, analysis and response.

Figure 2.1: Simplified visualisation of a complete feedback loop



Source: Author

Box 2.3 introduces some key definitions of terms used in the study.

Box 2.3 Clarification of the terminology used

Key terms

Complaint: 'a specific grievance of anyone who has been negatively affected by an organisation's action or who believes that an organisation has failed to meet a stated commitment' (HAP, 2010:6)

Complaints mechanisms: 'a formalised system addressing grievances' established 'to provide a safe opportunity to raise valid concerns and to have concerns addressed objectively against a standard set of rules' (DRC, 2009:3)..

Complaints procedure: a specified series of actions though which an organisation deals with complaints and ensures that complaints are reviewed and acted upon. Details of what is required in a complaints procedure are given in requirement 5.1 of the HAP 2010 Standard in Accountability and Quality Management. Organisations that meet the HAP Standard have procedures for handling all types of complaints, including those related to sexual exploitation and abuse of crisis-affected people by staff (HAP, 2010:6 and 20–21)..

Box 2.3 (cont.) Clarification of the terminology used

Key terms

Crisis-affected people: 'all those affected by or prone to disasters, conflict, poverty or other crises at a specific location' (HAP, 2010:5).

Feedback: 'information about reactions to a product, a person's performance of a task, etc. which is used as a basis for improvement' (Oxford Dictionary, 2013). In the humanitarian literature, it has been defined to include opinions, concerns, suggestions and advice that aid 'agencies may adopt, challenge or disagree with as appropriate' (Baños Smith, 2009:33). A definition proposed by Keystone Accountability is 'Information about constituents' perceptions of a set of activities and their impact. Feedback is used to influence related activities in the future' (Keystone Accountability, n.d.). A recent Save the Children guidance on programme accountability proposed a definition of feedback as: "a positive or negative statement of opinion about our programmes and the behaviour of our staff and representatives shared for information or action but not with the intention of lodging a formal complaint. Depending on the nature or seriousness of the feedback, however, the organisation itself may need to take the same action as if the feedback were a complaint." (Munyas, 2013:24)..

Complaints procedure: a specified series of actions though which an organisation deals with complaints and ensures that complaints are reviewed and acted upon. Details of what is required in a complaints procedure are given in requirement 5.1 of the HAP 2010 Standard in Accountability and Quality Management. Organisations that meet the HAP Standard have procedures for handling all types of complaints, including those related to sexual exploitation and abuse of crisis-affected people by staff (HAP, 2010:6 and 20–21).

Type I feedback: this is feedback concerning day-to-day implementation, often focused on the quality, type of assistance and users' preference about the assistance provided). This type of feedback can be relatively easy (less complex) to act on. This is feedback that often calls for project/programme level adjustments, mid-course modification such as 'tweaking' of service delivered or changes to the programme in the course of implementation. (Authors' own proposed definition).[11]

Type II feedback: this type of feedback speaks to 'big-picture issues'. It often touches on issues beyond the scope of work or remit of a single agency, of a single cluster, or even of the humanitarian community working in a certain context. It often touches on strategic issues at the broader level of the humanitarian response and strategies taken to support people's and national government's relief, recovery and reconstruction efforts. This is feedback that may challenge the very premise of a programme / or its relevance and context appropriateness. Often such feedback also touches on intended and unintended impact of the programme. It is more complex to act on as it often requires input and coordination from different actors (local, internal, humanitarian, non-humanitarian). (Authors' own proposed definition).[12]

Source: Authors' compilation

11 'A Future research and studies on feedback issues may propose further revisions and modifications of this initial proposed definition.

12 See footnote above.

2.3 Clarifying the research plan based on the research question to answer

It was mentioned earlier that this study's overarching research question concerns which features of feedback mechanisms for affected populations are most likely to contribute to the effectiveness of such mechanisms as perceived by different user groups – including, first and foremost, the crisis-affected communities.

In order to answer this question the research plan followed these steps:

1. **Identify** – through the literature review[13]– which FM features were generally described as being important for the success of the mechanism (for example: a supportive organisational culture within the implementing agency)
2. **Derive broad 'if–then' propositions** (tabled in Para. 2.4) about what makes an FM mechanism successful, based on these features. For example: if a feedback mechanism is run by staff within an agency that supports and values giving and receiving feedback as part of general management practice, then it is more likely to be effective. These propositions often combine several features.
3. **Decide on indicators (feedback markers)** to determine whether the features were, in fact, present in the case study examples (for example: staff training on the mechanism and the existence of a formal requirement to give and receive feedback as part of an agency's performance management system were two of several markers signalling the presence of 'a supportive organisational culture'). These markers were refined over the course of the research and were reflected in the development of a first set of questions to be included in the semi-structured interview protocol.
4. **Advance a definition of what is meant by effectiveness in the context of a feedback mechanism** (see Para. 2.6).
5. On the basis of this FM effectiveness definition, formulate a second set of questions to be included in the semi-structured interview protocol. These questions would allow respondents to say whether the mechanisms documented in the case study were effective according to this common definition. These questions were refined over the course of the research.

As a result of this preparatory process, the **semi-structured interview** protocol would allow FM stakeholder groups to respond to a broadly similar set of questions on:

- The degree to which the FM was effective overall.[14]
- The degree to which the features that the research team expected to see in effective mechanisms were, in fact, present.

13 'The desk analysis refers to the literature reviewed to derive the seven FM effectiveness propositions. Though nearly 150 documents were reviewed and entered in a research database, the following 10 documents were particularly influential (in alphabetical order): Bainbridge, 2011; Baños Smith, 2009; DRC, 2008; Mahmood and Barech, 2012; Raza and Khan, 2011; Sameera, Hassan and Akram, 2010; Thet, Khin and Khing, 2010; Wood, 2011a and 2011b; World Vision International – FPMG, 2009.

14 While there was a core set of questions put to all groups, there were some differences in the semi-structured interview formats for different groups, reflecting their different knowledge of, and degree of exposure to, the work of the feedback mechanism (affected people were not asked about the internal processes of organisations, for example).

2.4 Identifying who should provide information for the case studies

One of the key steps taken at the outset of the research before moving forward with the data collection was identifying – based on our reading of the relevant literature – the generic categories and types of actors (individuals and groups) that may have a stake, an involvement, more or less direct, in a humanitarian feedback mechanism. Each stakeholder group is introduced and described in Table 2.2 below.

During the case study visits, the allocation of the different case study participants and key informants to a specific stakeholder group was discussed by the research team on a case-by-case basis, and adjusted based on information and observations gathered before and during each field visit. Information was collected separately for each type of stakeholder, and a semi-structured interview protocol customised for each of these groups.

Table 2.2 Different feedback mechanism stakeholders identified at the outset of the research

Feedback mechanism (FM) stakeholder groups	Description
FM daily implement-ers	This stakeholder group includes: • programme implementation staff including those from local NGOs, and other local partners • activity support staff and volunteers (e.g. Community Help Desk staff in the Darfur WV example, community committees in the Haiti and Sudan case studies) • staff involved in day-to-day implementation of community engagement and communication activities (e.g. community liaison, and community facilitator officers in the CRS Haiti and British Red Cross Haiti examples.
Affected population / Aid recipients	The affected population is seen as comprising all those in an area affect-ed by a disaster or crisis. Aid recipients are those who receive aid or benefit from a service deliv-ered by aid agencies. In the context of this research, aid recipients are considered the main intended users, and ‘consumers’ of a feedback mechanism.
Non-recipients	Populations not eligible for or who have not received assistance. This may also include observers, or other individuals and groups involved in some way in aid efforts.

Feedback mechanism (FM) stakeholder groups	Description
Gatekeepers	This stakeholder group may include individuals and groups who: • can act as intermediaries between the agency and the affected communities • hold the position of implementing partners (IP) in the project, programme or operation within which the FM is anchored • in some cases are community residents occupying leadership positions or positions within local authority structures • can often play an 'infomediary role' as individuals able to translate and channel information from the agency to different groups and segments within the crisis-affected population • can also be in a position to play an obstructionist role and withhold information and feedback provided by community members to the aid agency.
FM supervisors	This may include: • field-based staff / operational staff in supervisory positions connected with the feedback mechanism • staff with a field coordination role, who often play a support and facilitation role in feedback collection and in passing on / referring feedback to other relevant FM stakeholders and partners • staff tasked with M&E / MEAL (Monitoring Evaluation Accountability and Learning) functions covering data entry, data analysis and reporting.
FM designer / owner	FM stakeholders in this group may overlap with those in the senior management group and FM supervisor group. They may – to some extent – be in the position of taking decisions about the projects, programmes and operations within which the feedback mechanism is anchored, as well as about the resources allocated to run the mechanism. FM stakeholders in this position may include: • staff in the position of taking decisions on changes to the feedback mechanism • staff responsible for quality assurance of the data entered, analysis, feedback summaries and reports produced.
Senior management group	This stakeholder group can include: - staff in programme management positions, as well as staff in more senior positions up to Head of Office and Head of Operations level. - staff in the position of taking decisions about the projects, programmes and operations within which the feedback mechanism is anchored, as well as about the resources allocated to run the mechanism.

Source: Authors' compilation

2.5 Deriving a set of seven propositions

As mentioned above, this research aimed to collect information that would support or disprove a series of seven propositions, tabled below. These propositions – identified through the literature review – concerned features of feedback mechanisms which the research team hypothesised would make the mechanisms more effective. The information collected from key informants, observations and subsequent analysis aimed to identify whether these features did actually make the mechanisms more effective, and also to identify any other features which were important but had had not been discussed prominently in the literature.

Table 2.3: Introducing the seven feedback mechanism effectiveness propositions to be tested

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

A humanitarian feedback mechanism is more effective if...	Related FM effectiveness proposition
...i) agency staff / field staff (and other staff such as community focal points and volunteers) acknowledge the feedback received from users; ii) agency staff / field staff act on or refer feedback received to the relevant party (within or external to the field project team, and, if needed, external to the organisation); iii) relevant actors (e.g. other departments within the organisation, project partners national authorities etc.) receive, acknowledge, and respond to feedback so that changes can be made at the appropriate level	PROPOSITION 6 on acknowledgement, response and use of feedback
...the feedback mechanism is run by staff (and sometimes implementing partners and volunteers) with the relevant competencies and attitudes; and the mechanism is run by staff within an agency that supports and values giving and receiving feedback as part of general management practice, and makes the necessary resources available for running the feedback mechanism.	PROPOSITION 7 on Individual and organisational support to the FM

Source: Adapted from Bonino and Knox Clarke (2013:10)

In order to test whether all, some or none of these desirable features contribute to the overall effectiveness of a feedback mechanism **a hypothesis was formulated that**:

- all the seven features have to be present for a feedback mechanism to be functioning; and
- a higher degree of manifestation of each of these seven features correlates with higher overall effectiveness of these mechanisms – discussed in the following paragraph.

2.6 Clarifying the meaning of effectiveness of a feedback mechanism

In the context of this research, **an effective feedback mechanism** has been defined as one where:

- the information gathered and generated through the mechanism is used, where warranted, to inform changes or corrective measures to improve some elements of a programme, or of the humanitarian response in general. Where information is not used in this way, a clear response is provided to the information
- the mechanism works for and enables access for the members of affected populations (individuals and groups of interest) across sex, age and other possible lines of vulnerability or discrimination, and to the broader affected population (as relevant).

The questions included in the semi-structured interviews were based on this definition: mechanisms were seen as being effective where:

- the intended users of the feedback mechanism – first and foremost the affected populations themselves – could describe some of the key steps in the feedback process, including at least how feedback collection and response worked
- individuals and groups from more vulnerable or marginalised segments of the population (based on sex, age and religious or political affiliations) appeared to be able to access the feedback mechanism
- the intended users of the feedback mechanism – including the affected populations – could provide some concrete examples of feedback use
- there is some consistency of views on what constitutes success or effectiveness of an FM. That means that the majority of FM stakeholders (as identified in Table 2.1) could consistently articulate their views and show their understanding of the purpose, desirability and practical use of the feedback mechanisms
- The majority of FM stakeholders could clearly articulate their roles, responsibilities and expected contributions to make the feedback mechanism work.

Box 2.4 Using markers to establish the presence of FM features of interest

Markers are often used (in both research and evaluation) as they provide an indirect indication of the evidence gathered on a phenomenon of interest. They are often used on the grounds that they may make it simpler to measure and provide reasonably reliable evidence to support the more general proposition (Darcy and Knox Clarke, 2013:9).

The research team identified markers which were believed to relate to each proposition. Wherever possible, these markers were objectively verifiable indicators that could signal whether conditions expected to lead to an effective FM were present. So, for example, markers for proposition 3 on 'expectation-setting and knowledge' included whether affected populations have opportunities to ask questions about how feedback channels work, how agencies share such information, how frequently, and whether the information is customised to effectively reach different groups and individuals in the affected population. Another marker related to whether affected populations or implementing partners have had opportunities to give feedback to the agencies about the feedback mechanism itself and how it works, and, if so, to whom they can give feedback and how.

Box 2.4 (cont.) Using markers to establish the presence of FM features of interest

Whenever possible, the markers were extracted from concrete examples reported in the available literature and were examined using yes-or-no questions where possible. The lists of markers relating to each of the seven features were not meant to be exhaustive, and they were discussed and refined by the researchers during each of the field visits. The use of markers was also critical to reducing the subjectivity and strengthening the reliability of the research conducted, as they:

- provide an indirect indication of the evidence gathered on a feature of interest
- are a simple tool by which researchers can check one another's results – which is another way of avoiding subjectivity. Concretely, instead of agreeing on broad principles about certain observations made (e.g. was an FM example culturally appropriate or not?) the researchers focused their discussion on more specific statements by case study participants and insights shared during the interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs)
- increase reliability by allowing work to be replicated by other researchers (e.g. using the same interview protocol) so that, ideally, other researchers would get similar results if they were doing the same case study, because they would be using the same 'measures' of the propositions.

Source: Author

2.7 Developing a protocol for field-level data collection

As explained above, this research relied on developing and making consistent use (across cases and types of FM stakeholders) of a semi-structured interview protocol built around a series of questions covering the seven FM features of interest, and a second series of questions on the overall functioning / overall effectiveness of the feedback mechanisms.

An example of how the interview protocol had been developed, taking into account the role and position of each stakeholder concerning the feedback mechanism, is featured in Annex 2. The protocol was used to get a sense of:

- the degree to which interviewees saw the FM as effective (using the guiding criteria mentioned above)
- the degree to which the features outlined in the propositions (periodic assessment; cultural appropriateness, etc.) were present or not. As discussed above, this was largely a question of identifying whether the markers for the propositions were present / absent. However, recognising that the markers were not perfect indicators, interviewers also recorded other information that might suggest that the conditions had been met.
- whether there were alternative explanations for effectiveness that had not been captured by the original propositions.

In total, more than 90 one-to-one interviews and focus groups were conducted – an average of 30 for each case study. This figure is made up of approximately one third FGDs conducted with affected populations, one third FGDs with agency staff, and the remaining third including one-to-one interviews with FM designers / owners, and senior managers.

Whenever possible, interviews and FGDs were conducted:

- with those selected to receive assistance, but also with those who did not qualify based on the eligibility and aid recipients selection criteria
- with men and women separately
- with village / community leaders separately from other groups.

As a limitation, it should be noted that information was not collected disaggregating by age.

In all cases, two interviewers were involved and they recorded results separately, before then discussing and validating observations on the relative presence of proxies and observations in relation to the overall effectiveness of the FM.

2.8 Analysing the case studies: a three-step process

The basic process of analysis covered three basic steps.

First step: Aggregating the data for each case study. The first step was to aggregate the information from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the various stakeholder groups. In each case, the research team aimed to identify an overall picture of:

- the degree to which the FM mechanism was seen as effective
- the degree to which the 'features for success' were present, thus proving or disproving one of the seven propositions
- whether other important features that might explain the success / lack of success of the FM were present
- whether respondents had provided a common narrative explanation of how certain features influenced the success or failure of the FM.

Second step: Establishing whether there was a pattern (analytical correlation) across the three case studies between the effectiveness of the FM and the presence or absence of certain features.

Third step: Investigating the relationship between effectiveness and the presence or absence of a feature, in the attempt to explain the patterns that emerged. This meant examining the narrative link that case study participants saw and described between the seven FM features of interest and overall FM effectiveness. This narrative analysis[15] was also used to identify possible alternative explanations of why and how different stakeholders saw certain FM features as contributing to the overall effectiveness of a feedback mechanism.

2.9 Analysing the case studies: Synthesising information from each case

For each interview, the two interviewers took separate notes. Most of the information provided by interviewees was qualitative in nature.

Once interviews were complete, the two interviewers compared notes for each group and each interview, and jointly assigned a simple code to each set of responses:

- ‘1’ when interviewees said that the FM was not effective or only slightly effective (for questions related to effectiveness of the FM) or that the ‘feature’ was not present or only marginally present (for questions related to the seven effectiveness propositions).
- ‘2’ when interviewees said that the FM was fairly effective (for questions related to effectiveness of the FM) or that the ‘feature’ was present to some degree (for questions related to the seven effectiveness propositions).
- ‘3’ when– interviewees said that the FM was very effective (for questions related to effectiveness of the FM) or that the ‘feature’ was strongly present (for questions related to the seven effectiveness propositions).

This exercise was conducted for all stakeholder groups involved in the case study. The researchers then compared the results to give an overall score for the effectiveness of the FM, and for the degree to which effectiveness features outlined under each of the seven propositions were present. In general, results were fairly consistent across the various stakeholder groups. Where this was not the case, the interviewers returned to the field notes of all the interviews to come to a judgement. The final aggregate result was most strongly influenced by the responses of the primary users. Where there were significant differences from the responses from different stakeholder groups, this is explained in the discussion in the next section of the study.

15 ‘Narrative analysis is one approach to analysing and interpreting qualitative data, whereby interview responses and FGDs materials are treated as ‘narratives’ involving actions which themselves demand analysis. Such analysis should take into account that events and actions are presented as non-random, reflecting some sense of chronology and sequencing, which link them in a way that has a meaning for those who propose a certain ‘narrative’. (See, for instance, Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; and Silverman, 2010.)

2.10 Analysing the case studies: Comparing the three case studies to identify patterns

The next step was to compare the three case studies, to see if any significant correlations (between effectiveness on the one hand, and the presence or absence of certain features on the other) occurred across all three. Again, this analysis began with consideration of the 'coded' results, to see whether it was the case that:

- where features were present, the FMs were more effective, and
- where features were absent, the FMs were less effective.

Table 2.4 shows how the results were visualised, using the 1-2-3 coding. It summarises and condenses all the evidence in a single short table to reveal an emerging pattern:

- whenever Y is present, the FM features X_1 to X_7 are present
- a higher presence of Y follows the higher presence of the FM features of interest X_1 to X_7.

Table 2.4: Data summary and visualisation to help detect relevant patterns (analytical correlation between elements)

Overall effectiveness of the feedback mechanism	Proposition 1 on periodic reassessment and adjustment	Proposition 2 on cultural and context appropriateness	Proposition 3 on expectation-setting and knowledge	Proposition 4 on feedback collection	Proposition 5 on verification and analysis of feedback information	Proposition 6 on feedback acknowledgement response and use	Proposition 7 on individual and organisational support
(Y)	(x_1)	(x_2)	(x_3)	(x_4)	(x_5)	(x_6)	(x_7)
SUDAN ***	•	• •	• • •	• •	• • •	• •	• • •
PAKISTAN ***	•	• •	• • •	• • •	• • •	• • •	• •
HAITI **	•	• •	• • •	• •	•	• •	•

Again, while the coding system supported the final analysis, it did not entirely determine the results. In deciding whether a specific feature was important or not in the success of the FM, the researchers went back to the interviews, and made particular use of the narrative element of the interviews – where people described how certain features were linked to the effectiveness of a feedback mechanism. Where relevant, these elements of the interviews have been included in the discussion below, in Section III.

An example of how the case study data and observations were analysed using this approach is featured in the box below.

Box 2.5 Example of identifying analytical correlation between elements of interest

For the first proposition on periodic reassessment and adjustment of the feedback mechanisms (X1) it was indicated that there is no pattern, no apparent correlation with Y (overall effectiveness of a feedback mechanism). This is because the aggregate level of X1 (indicated by one dot-symbol (•)) stays consistently low for all the three cases observed, regardless of how well, as a whole, the feedback mechanisms function. Put differently, a feedback mechanism seems to work more or less effectively, regardless of the contribution that periodic reassessment and adjustment brings. Or, viewed from the opposite angle: there is no suggestion of a relationship between actions and procedures related to periodic reassessment and effectiveness, and so it is unlikely that periodic assessment and adjustment contribute directly to the overall level of functioning of a feedback mechanism.

Source: Authors

2.11 Limitations

Conducting research on feedback mechanisms in humanitarian contexts is impacted on by many of the same constraints that affect data collection, research, evaluation, and evidence-gathering in humanitarian settings in general. Such constraints have been discussed at length elsewhere (see, for instance, Cosgrave and Buchanan-Smith, 2013, Section 1.5; Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2009; Norman, 2012). Some relate to key informants' availability; quality and availability of data; protection and ethical considerations when reaching out to key informants; and access and security considerations. Others relate to the strength of the design and methodology and their application during the fieldwork and subsequent analysis.

The researchers suggest that to grasp the limitations that affected this research, one could first look at those that impacted on the research design, as these affected the field-level data collection and analysis phase. Some measures were put in place to mitigate against such constraints. These included: a) iteratively refining and adjusting the questions and related markers of the interview protocol during the fieldwork itself; b) making extensive use of agencies' and key informants' comments and observations on each case studied; c) continuing to update the literature review during the fieldwork period, so as to include and take into account the new resources and literature shared with the research team during the visits; d) calling for research support both from ALNAP and CDA to discuss and validate observations and emerging findings throughout the process; e) seeking opportunities to present, discuss and validate intermediate research products in relevant fora.[16]

16 The Sudan case study has been presented to the WVI Accountability to Communities Workshop (Geneva, 2013), while the method paper was discussed at a roundtable at the American Evaluation Association conference (Washington DC, 2013).

Limitations in the design features

Some degree of overlap between the seven FM effectiveness propositions to be tested. Whereas on the one hand this facilitated some triangulation across responses received and data collected under several propositions, on the other hand it made it more difficult to confidently discuss the individual contributions of each factor to the effectiveness of the FM.

Overly broad effectiveness propositions: several of the effectiveness propositions contained a number of related but distinct concepts (for example: proposition 3 considered the degree to which affected populations had clear expectations about the purpose of the humanitarian programme overall and of the feedback mechanism, and understood the workings of the programme and the feedback mechanism: in effect, four separate, but related, sets of information. The broad scope of the seven effectiveness propositions resulted from trying to strike a balance between covering the whole gamut of possible factors affecting the design, establishment and maintenance of an FM, and keeping the data collection and analysis manageable. This selection was also informed by the findings from the desk review. This constraint was partially addressed during analysis, by unpicking interviewees' responses to the various elements of any given proposition, and – where necessary – noting these differences in the text.

Some degree of overlap between the different FM stakeholder roles that had been identified at the outset of the research. In some cases, for instance, the research team encountered agency staff, both in senior management positions as well as in FM designer / owner positions, who played or had played many of the roles concurrently. The ALNAP-CDA team encountered FM staff with different reporting lines in different organisations. For this, it was helpful to go back to the data synthesis tool (see Annex 3) to ensure consistency across cases when categorising different key informants to different FM roles. A related point to notice here is that non-aid recipients, although included in the initial research design, did not feature prominently in the field-level data collection phase of this research. The other FM stakeholders were generally given equal weighting in terms of responses given, with a skew towards allocating higher importance to responses from affected populations, including vulnerable and marginalised groups.

The limited capacity for conducting in-depth mapping and tracing (agency by agency and programme by programme) of all the decision-making processes and steps involved when action is taken to respond to and use affected populations' feedback. This study offers many examples where it was possible to describe such processes and decisions for 'smaller' activity-level adjustments and mid-course corrections based on participants' feedback (that the research team suggests referring to as type I feedback[17]). However, for the 'larger', more far-reaching decisions that took into account feedback on larger strategic or bigger-picture issues it was not possible to take more than a cursory look. Such 'larger' – and

17 See definition provided in Table 2.3.

“

Whenever possible, the ALNAP-CDA team collected and reported on ‘larger’ examples of feedback use.

”

often more ambitious – examples of feedback use (that the researchers suggests referring to as type II feedback) may lead to redesign of entire programmes and strategies. Whenever possible, the ALNAP-CDA team collected and reported on those ‘larger’ examples of feedback use. However, documenting which actors played a role in triggering these types of decision-making processes would have required a different design and scope of analysis. One that, for instance, included an examination of communication and reporting lines between programmes, across agencies’ branches and functional divisions, and which focused more on the funding, resource allocation and decision-making dynamics between national offices and headquarters.

Limitations in the information collection and analysis phases

In addition to the limitations inherent in the design, the following limitations were encountered at the stages of information collection and analysis.

Limited ability to compare qualitative information coming from interviews and focus group discussions about overall FM effectiveness, with detailed programme information (including evaluation) of the broader programmes and operations within which the FM functions.

Limited opportunity to gather detailed information from implementing partners, who, the researchers realised, in many cases play the crucial role of touchpoint between the agencies and the crisis-affected communities.

Lack of time, and logistical and administrative constraints often made it difficult to reach out to local authorities (e.g. at provincial and district level) to more consistently document their knowledge, views and expectations of feedback mechanisms put in place by aid agencies.

Documenting feedback mechanisms in real time during rapid onset emergency response operations[18] as not possible due to resource limitations and the possible strain on host agencies. It was only possible to study programmes that were already in early recovery or that were in protracted crisis contexts.

Though this factor is not limited to this research, **gender plays a role in researchers’ access to key informants.** For an all-female team of researchers, often using the translation support services of female national staff from the host agencies, the effect of this was reduced as it was generally always possible to reach women in the camps and sites visited. Nonetheless, challenges remained because travel and curfew regulations restricted day visits to the sites and access to the camps, villages and settlements, particularly in Sudan and Pakistan.

Some constraints in reaching certain key informants who had played a role in designing and setting up the feedback mechanisms and then left their positions, due to staff turnover, travel, or staff rotation or other deployments. For instance,

18 'The timeline often associated (for instance by the IASC) with this initial phase is zero to three months after peak or outbreak of crisis or sudden-onset natural disaster.

this was the case in Haiti and partially in Sudan. As far as possible, interviews were conducted over the phone after the field visit.

Challenges in establishing a single conclusion (related to effectiveness or to the degree to which FM features were in place) from a large amount of interview information from different stakeholder groups.

3

Analysing case study results, proposition by proposition

This section deals with testing the seven propositions that were formulated at the outset of the research (listed in Table 2.2). As previously discussed, testing those propositions requires examination of the relationship between the higher or lower presence of each of the seven FM effectiveness features of interest, and the overall effectiveness of the feedback mechanism.

Table 3.1 gives a summary of the key steps and related questions addressed in the analysis to test the seven propositions. While step 1 (**pattern analysis**) aims to establish the concurrent presence of two elements (i.e. each of the seven FM features of interest and the overall effectiveness of the FM), step 2 (**narrative analysis**) aims to consider the way in which such correlation (co-presence) of two elements is perceived and understood by different FM stakeholders, including affected populations.

The pattern analysis was based on the case study materials and qualitative data, which were summarised using a rating tool (explained earlier in Section II), and did not entail the use of statistics tools. The narrative analysis was also based on case study materials analysed using a light coding based on the seven FM features of interest and recurring proxies.

The narrative analysis is also used to cross-check what emerged from the pattern analysis and see whether and how case study participants describe the relationship between a certain FM features or characteristics and the overall FM effectiveness – and how they see it manifests in practice.

Table 3.1: Overview of the key steps in the analysis to test the seven FM effectiveness propositions

Steps	Types of questions asked during the analysis
Step 1. Pattern analysis Establishing the analytical relation between the higher or lower presence of each of the seven FM features of interest and the overall effectiveness of the FM	Is there a match in the pattern of how strongly a certain feature is manifested, and how well (i.e. how effectively) a feedback mechanism works? When we observe that a certain feature is strongly present (e.g. strong practice in verification and analysis of feedback data (proposition 5), do we also observe that the whole feedback mechanism is more effective? Conversely, when a certain feature is less present do we also observe an overall less effective feedback mechanism?
Step 2. Narrative analysis Establishing the narrative link to explain why certain FM features are seen as directly contributing (or not) to the effective functioning of a feedback mechanism as a whole	Do the FM stakeholders confirm or disprove the view that for instance a strong practice in verification and analysis of feedback data (proposition 5) directly contribute to the effectiveness of the feedback mechanism as a whole? Do the stakeholders make, or not, a descriptive link between the two elements? Or, do they provide alternative explanations for what makes the FM work effectively? How do the FM stakeholders qualify and explain the relationship between the presence of a certain feature (for instance the cultural and context appropriateness of a feedback mechanism (proposition 2)) and the overall effectiveness of the mechanism?

Source: Author

3.1 FM effectiveness proposition 1: periodic reassessment and adjustment

The initial proposition to test was formulated as follows:

A humanitarian feedback mechanism – and one that falls within the scope of this study – is more effective if: there are mechanisms in place, and time is allocated, to periodically reflect on, reassess and make necessary adjustments to the feedback mechanisms (e.g. based on changes in programmes, context, security, access, and / or changes in the affected populations' situations / status, changes in their preferences, including communication preferences, and changes in the use of assistance provided etc.).

Describing and explaining the pattern

The pattern analysis did not demonstrate a clear correlation between the two elements of overall FM effectiveness and periodic assessment and adjustment of a feedback mechanism.

This was because in all the cases observed, it seems that limited practice of periodic reassessment and adjustment had taken place. Some examples were given, but they remain scattered.

Overall, the case study materials showed that structured and periodic learning about and reassessment of the feedback mechanisms remain rare. We also found only limited instances in which formal assessments, reviews, or other learning-oriented exercises had taken place; and where they had taken place, they were very informal and had often not been documented.

> “Structured and periodic learning about and reassessment of the feedback mechanisms remain rare.”

Nonetheless, the narrative analysis showed that some FM stakeholders (mostly FM designers / owners) felt that there was a possible relationship between FM periodic reassessment and adjustment and its overall effectiveness, but they were not able to substantiate it because not enough practice had been accrued.

For example, we came across examples of agencies that are currently just at the planning and design phase of their FMs who are devoting greater attention to embed learning, reflection, and reassessment to support the functioning of the FM. However, many of these FM examples are still in a nascent stage. It seems too early to conclude whether these efforts to embed periodic learning and reflection about the FM will be sustained over time and reflect on overall improvements in the FM effectiveness.

One might conclude that the presence of other propositions, for instance the one on cultural and context appropriateness (proposition 2), or proposition 3 on expectation-setting and knowledge, could make up for the lack of features under proposition 1 on periodic reassessment and adjustment of the FM.

Box 3.1 Excerpt from the Sudan case study on the role and use of external evaluations and reviews looking at FM work

External evaluations of WV’s emergency response and food programming have in the past reviewed the overall contribution of accountability measures and the functions of the CHD system. Most recently, due to the deteriorating security situation, WV’s internal plans to reassess how the various mechanisms have worked to date and to introduce any necessary changes have been put on hold. One of the central motivations underlying the desire to reassess and adapt the mechanisms further is sustainability. WV would like to build processes that last, and outlast, WV’s presence and to enable people to continue to give feedback on service delivery to local authorities.

Source: Authors

Related observations on evaluative work on FM

Evaluations (internal, external, real-time or ex-post etc.) are one of the ways agencies can inform their decisions about reassessing and adjusting their work – including on MEAL issues, on communication with affected populations, complaints and feedback handling etc.

So far, it appears that feedback mechanisms have been rarely examined in evaluations. Out of the three countries visited, it was in Haiti that the greatest efforts had been made to assess and review some elements of their affected populations' communication and feedback system (for instance, through the evaluation and reviews conducted in 2011 and 2013[19], through the Haiti Learning initiative, and the work spearheaded by the IFRC Performance Accountability Working Group (PAWG)). In Pakistan, an upcoming evaluation of the FM practices that are part of the ORS programme has been recently commissioned by a donor.

> "In some cases, FM issues have been inserted as side topics in larger evaluations looking at different aspects of a programme."

In some cases, FM issues have been inserted as side topics in larger evaluations looking at different aspects of a programme. Many of the interviewees with whom the research team discussed these issues agreed that, where evaluations and reviews had been conducted around feedback mechanisms, they tended to concentrate on capturing and describing the demographics of the population reached through communication, information-sharing, two-way communication and feedback channels, and the efficiency of these services. In the context of their Haiti Earthquake Operation, IFRC, for instance, has looked at some of these aspects (see Chazaly, 2011, and Monti, 2013). Those reviews and evaluations, however, tended to be silent on the key issue of use of feedback for programme improvement and accountability purposes.[20]

In conclusion

The research does not clearly support the proposition that regular assessment and improvement leads to more effective feedback mechanisms. However, while the study suggests that FM can be effective without there being regular, formal assessment and reviews, it remains possible that effective mechanisms could be made more effective were such reviews to be conducted. On this basis, WV Sudan and IFRC in Haiti have started including the issue of FM work and use of feedback as standing items in the terms of reference for the evaluations, reviews and thematic studies that are periodically commissioned in their respective programme and operations.

At the same time, some forms of reflection, review, and consequent adjustment of the FM are accomplished (often in a slow, informal and incremental way) without having to single them out from the general improvement and learning orientations that seem to characterise the overall management and support given to the most effective feedback mechanisms and the programmes within which they are established.

19 See Chazaly, 2011, and Monti, 2013.

20 Dfid has recently commissioned an evaluation of IOM's feedback system in Pakistan. The evaluation's field work was conducted in the Fall of 2013 but at the time of writing the findings had not yet been finalised.

3.2 FM effectiveness proposition 2: cultural and context appropriateness

The initial proposition to test was formulated as follows:

A humanitarian feedback mechanism – and one that falls within the scope of this study – is more effective if:

…in the humanitarian context where the feedback mechanism is established it is 'normal' and culturally / socially acceptable to give feedback up the power gradient (for instance to staff in leadership and decision-making roles); and if the feedback mechanisms, communication tools and channels are known and familiar to the recipients using it.

Through the case studies the research team aimed to test whether feedback mechanisms that are culturally appropriate are also seen as being more effective. In particular, the team looked at whether feedback mechanisms work effectively in contexts where the idea of giving feedback is culturally accepted. The researchers also wanted to test whether feedback mechanisms are more effective when they use well-known and well-used communication media.[21]

Describing and explaining the pattern

The pattern analysis showed only a modest correlation between the two elements of overall FM effectiveness and the cultural and context appropriateness of a feedback mechanism. Mechanisms which were broadly similar in the degree to which cultural appropriateness had been considered in the design of the FM differed in the degree to which they were perceived as effective. The narrative analysis showed, however, that several FM stakeholders perceived that there is a much stronger link between the two elements.

Indeed, across the case studies aid recipients, implementing partners and agency staff in daily implementation positions (e.g. with field monitoring roles) would clearly articulate how certain feedback channels did or did not match their context, or fit culturally, and said that this made the mechanism more or less effective. They would ask for more of a certain tool, or medium of feedback communication to be adopted, or suggest different media and feedback tools which, by being more aligned with the local situation, would make the FM work better for them.

The case study materials showed that interviewees consistently pointed to links between cultural appropriateness and FM effectiveness, and explained why and how cultural appropriateness contributed to the success of the mechanisms. They also discussed how cultural appropriateness contributes to making FM more effective for example through the following actions:

Ensuring that staffing choices are culturally / context appropriate. Across all the three contexts visited, key informants designer/owner position, FM supervisor, and often the aid recipients themselves highlighted the critical role played by daily

21 For an overview of the communication tools and channels documented, see case study summaries in Section I.

implementation teams, and staff in field monitoring positions who are in closer contact with aid recipients and are often tasked with collecting feedback (and complaints) as part of ongoing monitoring activities. In Sindh, local focal points were seen as being crucial to ensuring that feedback mechanisms were viable and acceptable. The reasons given were that staff were female (and so able to talk to women in that culture); spoke the local language; knew local customs and were physically closer to operations, allowing for face-to-face contact.

Choosing communication and monitoring tools and channels that are culturally appropriate. This often includes balancing the in-person monitoring and feedback collection activities with other means of communication, monitoring and data collection (e.g. call lines, suggestion boxes, IVR etc..) depending on what is feasible and appropriate in a certain context.

Thinking about FM context appropriateness at the design stage when the mechanism is set up. This includes allocating roles and responsibilities to staff with the relevant competencies and characteristics to be able to access the most vulnerable population within that specific cultural context (e.g. Pakistan case). Additionally, taking into account issues of connecting with local authorities (e.g. Haiti and Pakistan cases); establishing some communication and reporting lines to branches and teams within the agency who are able to provide contextual knowledge and advice (e.g. Oxfam GB in Pakistan cross-team collaboration with gender and protection advisors team to strengthen follow up and response to feedback and complaints received from more vulnerable groups and individuals).

It is also important to try to ensure that some aspects of the FM work such as response and follow up are coordinated with local authorities and other relevant actors (e.g. Haiti case with Haitian Red Cross work with the Ministry of Health sharing feedback received through the IFRC- IVR system to update the content and targeting of common messaging around public health issues). ANother approach may be to establish some connections with other agencies and actors working in the same geographic area, of with the same affected population to be able to pass on messages and feedback received concerning other clusters or sector of operations (e.g. some examples in Pakistan with the Protection Cluster, and in Sudan – South Darfur with some of the work led by OCHA in the IDP camps around Camp Coordination and Camp Management issues).

> “Aid recipients in all three countries visited were particularly keen to explain how certain communication media did or did not match their context”

Aid recipients in all three countries visited were particularly keen to explain how certain communication media did or did not match their context, or fit culturally. They were also keen to suggest media which, by being more aligned with the local situation, would make the FM more effective. The following quotes are all from conversations excerpts with village residents in various areas of north and South Sindh:

- **‘Some agencies used to come and ask questions group by group, and to the women separately… but now it is all handled at community level’** (FGDs with group of displaced women in IDP camp, South Darfur)
- **‘Due to the dangerous situation, no one comes. No media, no NGOs and no district officials’ ‘We are in contact through the village focal point and the implementing partner. They are the one conveying the messages we have to IOM.’** (Village residents in ORS supported community in Sindh)

- **'In this context, for us the best would be using mobiles with toll free number. Why? Because it is direct … The other best option is for a team to come directly on the spot and verify issues.'** (Village residents in ORS supported community in Sindh)
- **'Community Help desk system is the best for food distribution - but for hygiene is household visit are better because you need to be at field level to see the behaviour'** (FGD with women's group (part of hygiene promotion committee) at IDP camp in South Darfur)

Aid recipients in North Sindh, Pakistan explained that giving and receiving feedback through in-person visits, for instance, by Shelter Cluster focal point staff is appropriate to their context. However, because of the difficulty of travelling to the project sites, and because of security threats aid agencies (and their implementing partners) would face if attempting to travel more often to their villages, communities rely on using a combination of different channels such as using call lines to get in touch with the agencies, sending letters directly to the agencies offices. It is this combination of tools and feedback communication modalities that they see as making the overall FM appropriate and suitable to their context and working well.

At the same time, the case studies also suggest that the relationship between being culturally appropriate and FM success is more nuanced than this – and this is reflected in the limited correlation in the pattern analysis.

While some level of cultural and context appropriateness is obviously necessary to the set up and running of a feedback mechanism, it is not sufficient to directly contribute to its overall effectiveness. We would argue that this is because – perhaps counter-intuitively – in order to be 'effective overall', the feedback mechanisms established in many of the fragile contexts where humanitarian actors operate, need to be set up to have both culturally appropriate and 'counter-cultural' elements. This is point is expanded below.

Making feedback mechanisms work across sex, age, and other lines of vulnerability or discrimination

A key element of cultural appropriateness, which was mentioned particularly by the affected population, is the degree to which women and other vulnerable groups have access to feedback mechanisms. These are issues largely determined by the role, degree of access to power, and the status that different groups across sex, age, and other lines of affiliation to political and religious groups enjoy in the local society and culture.

Prior, or during the field visits, an in-depth vulnerability analysis on the population that access, or fail to access the different FM channels was not conducted. However, in all the contexts visited, and for all the FM examples it was possible to document, the research team took note of whether, as a minimum, women had the opportunity to access the FM; whether they made use of that opportunity; and, if not, why. The researchers also made sure to have separate conversations with them to understand better which FM features facilitate women's engagement in FM processes.

Two main things emerged from these observations. Firstly – the role and status of women differed from one case to another, and where they appeared to play less of a role in the social sphere, they were also less able to access 'traditional' modes of communication. Secondly, that the agencies involved had recognised this, and had established additional mechanisms which ran against this prevailing culture by allowing women to communicate with the agencies.

In Haiti, for instance, there is generally more openness and acceptance of women directly engaging with aid agencies and programme staff including male staff. For instance, the research team came across several examples of women playing prominent roles such as district focal points, community facilitators and liaison officers.

In both Pakistan and Sudan contexts women (and other groups) appeared to be more vulnerable and excluded, and, at the same time, the appeared to be very focused and resolute in trying to mitigate against these constraints. They appear to give greater consideration to find solutions and FM approaches that work for all segments of the population, including the most marginalised. For instance, in the case studies in South Darfur and in Sindh, the researchers noted a greater emphasis (and allocation of staff and resources) on making sure that female agency staff were in a position to conduct field visits to allow for in-person communication and feedback exchange opportunities for women[22].

Moreover, in the more fragile contexts visited – which were often characterised by structural and systematic exclusion of or discrimination against certain segments of the population – and where the researchers could observe feedback mechanisms in action, it was noted that, at some level, perhaps surreptitiously, these mechanisms attempt to give all segments of the affected population more equal opportunities to access information and communication channels. There are persistent challenges to making this happen, and more equitable access to FM tools and channels would only be a piece of a larger puzzle.

- **'When I go to meetings [in the village] and there is even only one women, I try to bring it forward, but it doesn't work ... I keep worrying how much the sheiks articulate the needs of different beneficiary groups ... sometimes we meet with beneficiaries... but we still need always to look over our shoulders ... to reach the last, those at the back'** (Senior agency staff, UN agency South Darfur)

For aid agencies to be able to access women in affected populations, they need to be able to deploy female staff with that specific role. In Haiti this is not a main issue. In both FM examples documented in Sudan and Pakistan the research team could observe how agencies had managed to deploy, retain and support female staff in the affected areas where the programmes operate. These issues also partially overlap with and are covered in the themes in proposition 7 on individual and organisational support.

22 The research team has no information on this point on implementing partners. In the sites visited in Sindh, all the implementing partners they interviewed were male.

Agency staff's perspective

It emerged across the three main case studies that the agency staff, particularly those with daily implementation functions, clearly perceive how cultural and context appropriateness of the FM impact on the overall functioning of the mechanisms.

There seems, however, less discussion of the specific requirements and adjustments needed in contexts where some parts of the affected population lack access to feedback communications opportunities. There appears to be some awareness of these issues, but less clarity on how to go about addressing these imbalances. As mentioned above, one of the measures put in place by some agencies (particularly in Pakistan and Sudan) is ensuring the presence of female staff in monitoring and MEAL teams.

- **'Phone lines and technology are important but not a panacea. We need a change of mentality. Investing in listening to the people is critical'** (IOM programme staff, Pakistan).
- **'There is very limited experience with written feedback and a tradition of strong verbal culture [in South Darfur]. Nobody would write up complaints and use a box, but if you speak with people they open up ... Feedback mechanisms should not interfere with or undermine local structures and practices'** (WV programme staff, Sudan).
- **'When it comes to service provision, sheiks are those in an advocacy position – the voices of the most disadvantaged are lost ... [We] [agency name omitted] observe the dynamics in the camp ... it is like a state within a State ... there is a channel for everything: womens' union, youth union etc ... I think feedback mechanisms in the context of service provision are easier'** (Senior programme manager, Sudan).
- **WV has made a decision to rely on CHDs as the primary feedback channel within its largest intervention in South Darfur because: 'help desks are most appropriate for distributions ... because of the regular community gatherings, which make it easy for help desk members to be available and are easily accessible to beneficiaries ... Help desks are most useful for regular distributions with the same communities, due to the community-level training required for effective implementation'** (Programme staff, WV Sudan).

Among management and supervisory staff in Sudan and Pakistan, there was a view that attention to context and culture is absolutely necessary if an FM is to function at all. This is perhaps because of the access constraints and security concerns, and more general volatility of the environment in which humanitarian agencies in Sudan and Pakistan work.

While implementers, aid recipients and agency managers were fairly clear on the link between culture / context and effectiveness in all cases, it was only in Sudan that the gatekeepers also discussed this relationship. Box 3.2 indicates these observations.

Box 3.2 Example from the Sudan context of how a feedback process took into account pre-existing forms of communication, dispute resolution and intra-communal coordination

When discussing with IDP camp residents in South Darfur about the establishment of the feedback mechanism system, there has been no mention of formal or extensive consultation process. Nevertheless, when asked, the Community Help Desk (CHD) focal points themselves[23] and sheikhs explained that the CHD approach was in accordance with traditional feedback and response mechanisms that have been practiced by the local communities. They went on to explain that since displacement some of the leadership structures have changed, but people remember the dispute-resolution mechanisms that had existed in their villages. Often these included scenarios where complaints were taken up the chain through the sub-sheikhs and, if not resolved, were forwarded to the senior sheikhs.

In Kalma camp, the senior sheikhs explained that sub-sheikhs are still responsible for collecting feedback from their constituents and bringing the critical issues to the attention of the chief sheikh of the camp. The sheikhs also gather feedback from hygiene promotion committees and other community-based associations in the camps. Information is collated, verified by the sheikhs when necessary and the chief sheikh of Kalma camp communicates it to staff at the UN OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs).

Source: Jean with Bonino (2013:19)

In conclusion

FM cultural and contextual appropriateness makes an important contribution to how an FM functions. However, this feature by itself cannot determine effectiveness of a mechanism because there can be instances and contexts in which proposing 'only' a context- and culturally appropriate FM could stop certain vulnerable or marginalised segments of the population accessing the feedback communication channels.

Cultural / contextual appropriateness can be enhanced in a variety of ways, particularly through: staffing choices and human resource support for monitoring activities; choice of communication and monitoring tools and channels used by the activities, services, programmes and operations within which the feedback mechanism is anchored; and design and institutional set-up and location of the mechanism. However, three caveats are in order:

- The first is that the cultural and context appropriateness of the whole programme within which the FM is anchored is possibly a stronger contributor to (or predictor of) overall FM effectiveness than the cultural appropriateness of

23 CHD are displaced persons living in the camps; they perform a CHD role on a voluntary basis. They themselves receive humanitarian assistance.

the feedback mechanism alone.

- The second is that, where a society marginalises certain population groups, then the FM may need to be designed to be 'countercultural': that is, to encourage them to provide feedback in a way that would not normally be allowed or seen as appropriate.[24] The observations and evidence the research team could gather on this specific point are limited. The researchers are not in a position of advancing a definite comment on the extent to which this is currently happening in contexts such as in Pakistan and Sudan. Nonetheless, there are tangible agency efforts to ensure that – at minimum – female staff are part of food distribution focal points, monitoring teams and cluster coordinator teams and that they are aware of the importance of reaching out and listening to feedback from women and other marginalised groups in the camps and affected communities.
- The third is that agencies should consider the wider culture and context, and ensure that the FM works with the culture of local government and with that of implementing partners, where these are not the same as the culture of the population receiving assistance.

On this basis it is possible to reformulate the original proposition as follows:

Revised FM effectiveness proposition 2 on cultural and context appropriateness

A humanitarian feedback mechanism – and one that falls within the scope of this study – is more effective if:

- the feedback mechanisms and feedback channels are known and familiar to the affected populations, agency staff and other actors accessing or using them;
- the FM channels are set up in a way that provides equitable access to the different (more or less vulnerable and marginalised) segments of the affected population.

Moreover, a feedback mechanism appears to be more effective if cultural and context-specific considerations have been reflected in:

1. staffing choices and support for monitoring activities;

2. choice of communication channels and monitoring tools used in the activities, services, programmes, and operations within which the feedback mechanism is situated.

24 This would also pose challenges when it came to measuring effectiveness of such feedback mechanisms, because this would entail measuring something that certain segments of FM users in the population do not recognise as being important.

3.3 FM effectiveness proposition 3: expectation-setting and knowledge

The initial proposition to test was formulated as follows:

A humanitarian feedback mechanism – and one that falls within the scope of this study – is more effective if:

affected populations are clear about what they can legitimately expect from the feedback mechanism and the organisation running it. And if affected populations / communities are aware of and understand how to use the feedback mechanism (and are made aware of changes affecting them).

Through the case studies the research team aimed to test whether the more effective feedback mechanisms are those with greater clarity and alignment between agencies and aid recipients around on what can be expected from an FM and, more broadly, from the agency running the programme within which the FM is established. The researchers also wanted to probe whether the most effective mechanisms are those where affected communities are aware of and understand how to use the mechanism, and are aware of the changes affecting them.

Describing and explaining the pattern

We could observe that functioning feedback mechanisms in the three countries visited display strong features relating to expectation setting around, and knowledge of the mechanisms. In all three cases efforts had been made to clarify what aid recipients could expect from the programme and (to a lesser extent) how they could use the FM mechanism to provide information on the degree to which these expectations had been met.

In general, the pattern matching suggested that the stronger performing mechanisms tended to display more of the features (and markers) related to this proposition. Where the features were weaker (that is, where aid recipients were less clear about what they could expect) the feedback mechanism was less effective.

Similarly, interviews in the three countries – particularly with aid recipient groups, and within the agencies, among FM designers/ owners and FM daily implementers groups – suggested that the correlation was not accidental, but that there is a direct link between expectation-setting and overall FM effectiveness. Interviewees saw the following factors as making a particularly important contribution:

- consistency of the messaging within agencies, and with agencies' partners, on the desirability and usefulness of the feedback mechanism; and
- consistency of the messaging with affected populations on the potential usefulness of the mechanism, and how to concretely access it and make use of it.

Different perceptions on utility and desirability of establishing and using feedback mechanisms

The cases observed underscored that different FM stakeholders have a rather nuanced understanding of what feedback mechanisms are expected to do and accomplish. Nevertheless, across the cases, and across FM stakeholder groups there are some points of common understanding as shown in table 3.2 with the grey highlights. For example, across the cases observed it appeared that: FM daily implementers and implementing partners see the FM as a mechanism to support programme targeting and selection of eligible aid recipients, while aid recipients see it one of the ways they have to ask for additional or different types of services. Programme managers seems to take a view that FM are a mechanism to produce information that can help justifying changes to a certain activity a programme feature, or technical specification of assistance items provided.

Table 3.2 shows the different nuances. Some are indicated as pertaining to a specific case, or context observed. Others – highlighted in grey – appeared common to all cases observed. This nuanced understanding seems to come from a combination of how the agencies present and repeat the key messages around the FM, how to access it, and how it can be useful; how they experience the FM in being useful to bring some change; and how they perceive and experience the overall programme or service delivery carried out by the agency (e.g. with tight monitoring and oversight, with more flexibility and greater margins for consultations etc..)

The points highlighted in grey in the table below indicate what appeared to be a common understanding of what FMs do in all the contexts visited. All the other points indicate the different nuances that emerged in the interviews during the three field visits.

Table 3.2: Different ways in which feedback mechanisms are seen and their functions understood

FM stakeholder groups	Different ways in which FM is seen and its functions understood
FM daily implementers / implementing partners	The FM is mainly understood by this group of stakeholders as a mechanism useful to provide data to: • help with troubleshooting at activity / service-delivery level (all cases) • support the smooth-running of the programme / operation (all cases) • support affected populations' selection, programme / activities targeting (all cases) • support monitoring and use of assistance provided (all cases) • strengthen quality assurance (Sudan in particular) • help avoid escalation of issues (Haiti).

FM stake-holder groups	Different ways in which FM is seen and its functions understood
Affected popula-tion / Aid recipients (Female)	The feedback mechanism is perceived as: • one way to ask for additional or different type of services / different types of assistance (all cases) • part of what aid agencies do to monitor and follow up if aid is not delivered (the Pakistan and Sudan cases in particular).
Affected popula-tion / Aid recipients (Male)	The feedback mechanism is perceived as a providing a way to: • ask for adjustments in aid recipients' selection from among the affected population (all cases) • ask for adjustments in targeting who is entitled to participate in a programme or receive assistance (all cases) • ask for additional or different types of services / different types of assistance (all cases). The perception is that 'agencies do it for verification purposes' (the Pakistan case in particular).
Those not receiving assis-tance	no relevant data
Gate-keepers	The feedback mechanism is perceived as: • a channel that allows them to communicate and get in touch with the agencies (all cases) • existing 'to uncover mismanagement of aid distribution' (particularly in the Pakistan case)
FM super-visors	The feedback mechanism is perceived as: • providing alerts about implementation challenges (all cases) • a tool to support the smooth running of activities and programmes (all cases). However, agency staff in this position may feel they have to talk pos-itively about the feedback mechanism, or about the decisions taken by staff in higher management positions. They may also feel threat-ened by feedback content because of potential / implied criticism and doubt about their abilities / performance.

FM stake-holder groups	Different ways in which FM is seen and its functions understood
FM de-signer / owner	The feedback mechanism is perceived as: • providing alerts about implementation challenges (all cases) • a tool to support the smooth running of activities and programmes (all cases) • encompassing information-sharing, two-way communication and coordination functions as part of how cluster responsibilities are understood (the Pakistan case) • contributing to accountability towards affected populations (particularly Haiti and Sudan) • an integral part of MEAL functions of a programme (particularly Haiti and Sudan) • providing alerts about security (including staff security) risks (particularly Sudan and Pakistan) • strengthening programme quality and accountability to affected populations (particularly the Sudan case) • increasing understanding of the relevance of the programme (Sudan).
Senior manage-ment group	The FM is mainly understood by this group of stakeholders as a mech-anism useful to provide data: A. to more senior management staff including national director and head of operation positions: • to support the argument for a change in strategy / change in programme focus etc. (all cases) • for advocacy purposes (Sudan and Pakistan in particular) • to reinforce a point / a business case to influence donors' funding decisions. (Sudan and Pakistan in particular) B. to programme managers: • to support the case for changes in the technical specifications of a product, tool, or service delivered (all cases) • to provide alerts about implementation challenges (all cases) • for trend analysis / performance analysis over time (Haiti and Sudan in particular) • to provide alerts about security (including staff security) risks (the Sudan, Pakistan cases).

Source: Authors' compilation from case studies and field notes

Note: The bullets listed in the table are a summary from field notes and not verbatim transcriptions from field interviews with the different set of stakeholders.

This compilation underscores the fact that feedback mechanisms can be designed within different programmes and contexts to effectively carry out different functions – generally monitoring, troubleshooting, and communication – to gain a variety of benefits from quality assurance to programme acceptance and ownership.

However, because different FM stakeholders view FMs differently, and have varying and have varying expectations as to why FMs can be useful to them, it appears all the more important to communicate clearly and consistently (within and outside the aid agencies) what a specific mechanism can (and cannot) accomplish in a given programme and context.

It could be argued that these differing understandings of the purpose of FM do not, in most cases, contradict each other – and so do not greatly decrease the effectiveness of the mechanism: to a degree, all stakeholders get what they want out of the mechanisms.

“Agency staff seemed less clear than many aid recipients regarding how the mechanisms worked.”

Interestingly, agency staff seemed less clear than many aid recipients about how the mechanisms worked. This was because, unlike aid recipients, they were primarily concerned with what happened to information when it entered the organisation, and particularly how the information from the mechanism was used in conjunction with information from other monitoring sources to make decisions. This, again, appeared to be less a matter of communication than one of design, and points to the importance of ensuring that the information and decision path is a clear element of the mechanism design.

In conclusion

The relevance of this proposition was supported by the research. However, as discussed above, the scope covered by this proposition needs to be broadened to include:

- expectation of and knowledge of the feedback mechanism by agency staff, implementing partners, and, whenever relevant, other local actors and local authorities; and
- clear and consistent messaging within agencies, and with agencies' partners on the purpose, desirability and usefulness of the feedback mechanism.

These observations are reflected in how the proposition has been revisited.

Revised FM effectiveness proposition 3 on expectation-setting and knowledge

A humanitarian feedback mechanism – and one that falls within the scoping set for this study – is more effective if:

- i) affected populations as well as agency staff and other relevant actors (implementing partners and local authorities as relevant) are clear about the purpose and uses of the mechanisms and what they can legitimately expect from it (and from the organisation running the FM);
- ii) desirability and potential usefulness of the mechanism have been communicated clearly and consistently to affected populations, as well as agency staff, and partners;
- iii) affected populations, agency staff and other relevant actors are aware of and understand how to use the mechanism and are made aware of changes affecting both the mechanism and the programme, service, activity etc. within which the mechanism is anchored.

3. 4 FM effectiveness proposition 4: feedback collection

The initial proposition to test was formulated as follows:

A humanitarian feedback mechanism – and one that falls within the scope of this study – is more effective if:

users perceive that the methods used for the collection of feedback are accessible, safe, do the job, and provide a trustworthy channel for feedback. (Confidentiality is ensured where relevant.)

Through the case studies the research team aimed to test whether the more effective feedback mechanisms are those that use feedback collection methods, tools and channels which are seen as safe and accessible, and – where relevant – confidential.

Describing and explaining the pattern

Across the cases, the research team could observe a correlation between how well a feedback mechanism is performing and how trustworthy, safe and accessible are the feedback channels used. However, the correlation is not neat because one of the FM cases that was rated as effective (Sudan) was only seen as moderately strong in this area. Therefore, it was not possible to conclude from correlation alone that there is necessarily a relationship between accessibility and effectiveness.

> “
> **a correlation between how well a feedback mechanism is performing and how trustworthy, safe and accessible are the feedback channels used.**
> ”

However, during the case study visits, interviewees across the various FM stakeholder groups consistently emphasised how they perceive and value the accessibility, trustworthiness, and reliability of the feedback collection channels they use. So it would appear from the narrative analysis that accessibility and safety do have a significant effect on the degree to which people are able and prepared to use an FM, and so contributes to its effectiveness.

Often issues of accessibility and safety were discussed in relation to context and cultural appropriateness, suggesting that people perceive a strong relationship between the two elements of a successful mechanism.

Agency staff's perspective

Looking across the different FM stakeholders, staff from the implementing partners agencies, staff in FM designer / owner positions, and staff in daily implementation positions, there are those who most often perceive and explain how critical they see the correlation between having in place diverse, safe, accessible and trustworthy feedback channels and how well the mechanism function overall. This is perhaps to be expected, especially as the FM daily implementers de facto function as the touchpoint between the agency and the affected population / aid recipient groups.

- **'This is the basic idea: provide as many communication channels as possible ... this was needed particularly in the districts that were more broken down' (Agency staff in programme management position** (with FM supervisor functions), Pakistan)

- '**We started by conducting a satisfaction survey for all our programmes … and we tried to include not only elements related to the WHAT, but also to the HOW. Part of the HOW are elements related to communication and community expectations…'** (Red Cross staff, Haiti)

The strength of the correlation seems then to decrease as one moves up the hierarchy of roles and management responsibilities in an agency, as it is lower for the senior management stakeholder group. This could be explained by the fact that staff in senior management positions (up to head of operation and country director levels) are more removed, and less exposed to the daily work of the feedback mechanism.

Aid recipients' perspective

From the interviews and group discussions with aid recipients and programme participants, it was clear that feedback channels which include regular, face-to-face communication were the preferred option in all three cases. Two themes were consistently repeated: firstly, the general preference for in-person interactions; and secondly, the value placed on the complementarity of different tools and channels put at their disposal so long as they do not replace face-to-face communication.

"Give us a proper office address so we could write a letter … because we don't have internet to send email" (Village residents, Sindh – Pakistan).

- **"Just like your research team, other agencies should visit and talk to us directly."** (Woman in an affected village in North Sindh).
- **"We talk to the IPs. We don't have their personal mobile numbers, but we wish we had it. We don't have access to a cell phone, but in a situation of need, we would manage to get in touch with them because men in the village have mobile phone and they can use it"** (Women from a village in a flood affected areas, North Sindh) .

Another striking feature, across all cases, is that aid recipients often showed curiosity, readiness, and willingness to experiment with new feedback channels – even if they may not be familiar with them – provided that those do not replace face-to-face communication.

- **'The agency continues asking us what we can suggest and advise them to do to communicate more effectively with them. We thought of different options … for instance … the suggestion box could be opened in front of the community … or there could be an external person for oversight of the process … another suggestion would be if all the agencies would work together … it would be possible to have a radio station … so that all populations will listen'** (FGD with village residents (men and women) in a rural community near Leogane, Haiti).
- **'The call in line is the new communication element introduced … they gave us a flier at the food distribution point … We know it has been piloted in [name omitted] [another] camp … we know that the telephone numbers provided are from the food committee people, M&E officer, national staff, milling voucher focal point … The line is good, but we would like to combine more tools, more mediums'** (FGD with group of displaced women in IDP camp, South Darfur).

How agencies select feedback channels

It appeared that many feedback collection channels have been established and are used for purposes other than feedback gathering (e.g. for monitoring, targeting, and information-sharing purposes). The collection (and handling) of recipients' feedback had been added onto pre-existing communication and monitoring channels. Prior to establishing such channels, it is not clear how extensive and detailed consultations with the users had been.

At the same time, most of the agencies working with FMs were devoting attention to considering how communication and feedback collection channels work, and whether they can be adjusted (ORS programme in Pakistan; IVR in Haiti); or scaled-up (two-way communication practice in Sudan; CRS in Haiti working in consortium with Concern); or whether something new can be tried (working with radio programmes, WFP Sudan). These are points that also strengthen some of the observations made under proposition 1 on periodic reassessment and adjustment.

Where agencies were currently in the process of planning or piloting FMs, there was interest in assessments, feasibility analysis, and consultations with aid recipients in order to design feedback mechanisms that are accessible and clearly presented, and that generate useful information for both programme improvement and MEAL strengthening purposes. This is, for instance, the case with the Spanish and American Red Cross in Haiti, Tearfund and WFP in Sudan, and ACTED and Oxfam GB in Pakistan.

From the observations made and interviews conducted it did not emerge that case study participants associated the use or lack thereof of higher-tech / ICT tools and channels as causing the FM to be more or less effective. It is not clear whether in certain contexts such as in Haiti the use of higher ICT-content tools has been driven more by the desire to innovate and monitor communication and feedback practice; by the operational needs relating to the scale and magnitude in number of the operation; or by availability of funding and communication technology in urban settings such as Port au-Prince that would not be available in other contexts.

Two remarks may be important for agencies selecting communications channels The first is to try limiting the proliferation of tools employed and communication channels opened by agencies to communicate and receive and response to feedback. This appears to be linked to the fact that easy access to technology and mass communication platforms has dramatically expanded the broadcasting and communication options in the humanitarian communication toolbox.[25] Agencies should ensure that the media they select really are accessible and safe, and not just 'new'.

The second is try ensuring that feedback data gathering capacities does not outstrip the data analysis and response capacities of the agencies. This is something that appeared to be problematic is virtually all the FM examples observed and in the longer term, this could also affect expectations of stakeholders and the overall effectiveness of the feedback mechanism.

25 For a discussion on these issues see OCHA, 2013

This point is at the core of the analysis for the next proposition (FM effectiveness proposition 5 on verification and analysis of feedback information). However, it has implications for the selection of communication media and tools as well.

Observations on feedback collection methods for women

There is an overlap between the observations recorded under this proposition on feedback collection, and those presented and analysed earlier under FM proposition 2 on cultural and context appropriateness. When it comes to reaching the women in the affected population, the features of accessibility, safety, and trustworthiness of the feedback collection channels seem to be directly connected with the overall cultural and context appropriateness of the mechanism as discussed earlier. This connection emerged when looking at whether and how successfully feedback channels reach women in the affected population.

- **'We are aware that women don't have access to the complaints mechanisms ... we know that some organisations [including implementing partners] uphold Sphere and HAP standards ... the gap remains where they haven't been able to motivate local organisations to mobilise [to reach women]'** (FGD with national staff, Shelter Cluster, Sindh – Pakistan).
- **'the challenge is that field monitors are part of the local population, so you would always need to have both men and females on the team, but in KPK there are very high security concerns and this is a challenge'** (Agency staff in assessment and M&E positions (with FM design and supervision functions), Pakistan).

It appears that, in order to provide safe and accessible channels for women (and, potentially, other groups who do not fully access the social realm), the methods used need to strike a difficult balance between being culturally appropriate and using more innovative ways to reach people who would not normally expect to give feedback. This observation echoes and is in line with the analysis presented earlier under proposition 2 on the cultural and context appropriateness of feedback mechanisms.

In conclusion

The relevance of this proposition was supported by the observations and analysis conducted. However, the proposition needs to be adjusted by reflecting some of the key elements relating to the context and cultural appropriateness of feedback channels that emerged from the analysis.

Revised FM effectiveness proposition 4 on feedback collection

A humanitarian feedback mechanism – and one that falls within the scope of this study – is more effective if:

- users (affected populations; agency staff and implementing partners) perceive that the methods used for the collection of feedback are accessible and safe;

and provide a trustworthy channel for feedback
- confidentiality is ensured where relevant, particularly in cases where feedback channels may be used to submit SEA allegations or allegations of other abuses such as fraud, misconduct etc.)
- feedback is gathered using a variety of channels – even those that may have been established for other purposes (e.g. monitoring, information-sharing, field visits, household (HH) visits and surveys etc.)
- feedback channels reflect consideration of cultural and context appropriateness, particularly to improve access to feedback channels for more vulnerable and marginalised groups.

3. 5 FM effectiveness proposition 5: verification and analysis of feedback information

The initial proposition to test was formulated as follows:

A humanitarian feedback mechanism – and one that falls within the scope of this study – is more effective if:

- feedback data is disaggregated based on the nature of feedback and complaints received (for instance, smaller issues versus more serious or programmatic / strategic issues); and
- data quality is ensured (including through logging, sorting, checking, analysing and synthesising feedback data as appropriate); and iii) feedback data is processed and shared paying attention to who will receive this information and who is expected to use it.

Through the case study work, the research team examined whether feedback mechanisms that enable and support effective verification and analysis of feedback information are also seen as being more effective. Specifically, it was examined whether the overall FM effectiveness is linked to practices in verification and analysis of feedback that include:

- disaggregating, sorting and grouping feedback received, based on the nature of its content (e.g. separating 'smaller', more actionable issues relating to activities and service provision, from more serious grievances, and from issues of programmes and strategies etc.);
- ensuring quality of feedback data including through verification and triangulation of the information received; and
- analysing, synthesising, reporting and sharing feedback data, adjusting the level of detail, and customising the reporting formats based on the users who will receive the information and are expected to use it.

Describing and explaining the pattern

Looking across the whole set of seven FM effectiveness propositions tested, the one on verification and analysis of feedback information seems to display the strongest and clearest correlation between how well this component of a feedback mechanism works and how effective the whole mechanism is.

The pattern matching analysis suggests that when this specific component of a feedback mechanism functions well, the whole mechanism seems more successful. Conversely, it appeared that the least well performing FM cases are those where feedback verification and analysis worked less well.

The narrative analysis – particularly with agency staff –suggested an explicit link between the presence of procedures and systems that support the verification of feedback data and its analysis, and the overall well-functioning of the mechanism. The case study participants also gave some explanations for why that was the case.

In particular, the narrative analysis showed that it is through feedback verification and analysis that decision makers become aware of the relevant information, and have confidence in it. This makes it more likely that they will respond, allows them to make more informed decisions.

This, in turn, seems to increase users' confidence in the mechanism as well as strengthening the 'business case' that FM designers / owners can present to their senior management to support FM work.

Verification and analysis of feedback data has been discussed, particularly by agency staff as particularly important in contributing to more effective FMs (and potentially to more effective programmes).

- **"Data verification is key, we check, and double check … when we receive complaints, the first thing we do is checking accuracy, then we make it concise, then we disseminate … we need to authenticate information .. There have also been cases where from the national level we have been asked to re-check information"** (Shelter cluster focal point staff, Pakistan, North Sindh).

Yet, verification and analysis of feedback data is a component that seems to receive less attention when feedback mechanisms are designed. In many of the FM examples observed, more emphasis was given to the collection phase of FM work to the detriment of the subsequent data verification, synthesis and data analysis steps. Some of the less high-performing mechanisms, which did not appear to have solid verification and analysis functions, seemed to illustrate this: greater attention was paid to feedback collection steps at the expense of feedback analysis, reporting and synthesis. The quotes below speak to these points:

- **'If one year ago it was enough to have user data and data about access to the beneficiary communication tools … now we want more … we want to know how beneficiary feedback is used for programme modification!'** (Staff from RCRC society in Haiti).
- **'We need to be drawing our own analysis… and we need to be able to draw our own conclusions'** (Agency staff, Haiti).
- **'The two-way communication is happening. The closing of the feedback loop is not. The machine is there but we are either getting too much information, or too late … There is no analysis … and how do I trust the information? We need to make sure feedback is reliable … and that it is not pushing us in the wrong direction'** (Agency staff, Haiti).

- **"We think we came up with the best system that can work under those circumstance here in Pakistan… and its main qualities are speed of action and reliability of collection, analysis, verification and follow up"** (Aid agency staff, Pakistan).

During the field visits, it was also possible to observe several teams 'at work' while running a feedback mechanism. Those teams showed greater confidence in the overall potential and utility of the feedback mechanism when they trusted: a) the quality of the information generated from the mechanism; and b) the periodic nature and timeliness with which this feedback information is analysed and passed on to those in a position to take action on it.

The latter issue was not explicitly mentioned in the initial FM effectiveness proposition but should be included.

Aid recipients' perspectives

The observations and insights from the aid recipients group are fairly limited on this specific issue, as members of this group generally do not know how information is verified and analysed once it has been communicated to the agency. The research team found very limited instances where affected people could explain what they thought happened once their feedback reached the agencies' offices.

Aid recipients had an expectation that somebody would look at their feedback, and possibly respond, or get back in touch with them with clarifications on what could or could not be done. The few observations from the aid recipients group about this specific proposition mainly relate to their expectation that what they communicate to the agencies 'arrives' at the relevant staff who could do something about it, and is treated with confidentiality if needed.

Agency staff's perspective

The issue of recipients' feedback analysis is only sporadically addressed in the literature (see, for instance, Nyati, 2009). However, agency staff interviewed for all three cases – FM designers / owners – clearly emphasised and brought to our attention how crucial this specific element is for the overall high functionality of a feedback mechanism. It is also possible that agency staff at mid- to senior level were particularly keen to discuss feedback analysis issues (even when they thought their agencies were not doing so well in that respect) because that is one of the few elements in the feedback handling process over which they could exercise fuller control (including quality control).

In particular, they emphasised that their ability to respond to feedback (and close the feedback loop) is directly linked to their actions relating to:

- sorting the data received through different channels (e.g. sorting information requests, complaints about behaviour by staff or implementing partners, complaints about programmes, other grievances related to community

dynamics, complaints about the service provided etc.)
- disaggregating the data on the basis of gender and vulnerabilities criteria (e.g. feedback, complaints coming from single-female-headed households etc.)
- checking for accuracy of the information received
- synthesising feedback data, adjusting the level of detail and granularity of the data to meet the information needs of different users – from senior programme managers to field-based staff, to implementing partners etc.
- customising the format of presentation of feedback data – depending on who is expected to use it
- analysing aid recipients' feedback data in conjunction with other sets of data, including looking for trends over time using qualitative and quantitative data such as data from assessments, monitoring / post-distribution monitoring, market surveys, population surveys, field visits and observations etc.).

The following excerpts from the interviews and group discussions exemplify these observations:

- **'Field monitoring staff use a database on which first a data cleaning and data analysis is carried out. This should be done at area level. One field monitoring staff member would cover six to seven HH per day filling in a form per HH' (Agency staff in assessment and M&E position** (with FM design and supervision functions), Pakistan).
- **'Before entering the data, there is a discussion among local staff. If there is a problem, we use an internal mailing list of three, four people, including the head of sub-office, and head of programme in Islamabad. This mailing is especially used for issues related to bribery, or any other problem related with data verification [on the data that comes from the implementing partners]'** (FGD with national staff – Shelter Cluster, Pakistan).
- **'Data verification is key, we check, and double-check to uncover fake complaints' 'When we receive complaints, the first thing we do is check accuracy, then we make it concise, then we disseminate' 'We need to authenticate information … There have also been cases where a request came from national level (capital) to recheck the information'** (FGD with national staff – Shelter Cluster, Pakistan).

In conclusion

The relevance of this proposition was supported by the observations and analysis conducted. Not only is there a correlation, but stakeholders were able to clearly explain how analysis and verification lead to more effective FMs (and possibly to more effective programming in general).

One of the reasons that explain why such correlation emerged so strongly is that this proposition seems to lay the foundations for others (such as proposition 6 on feedback acknowledgement, response and utilisation) and has had its own foundations laid by other propositions (for instance proposition 3 on expectation setting and knowledge and 4 on feedback collection). In other words the further we move into the feedback handling process (feedback loop) the more we can appreciate how the different FM features of interest – like this on verification and analysis of feedback information – become reliant on other FM features coming into play earlier in the feedback loop (e.g. well-functioning and appropriate feedback collection practices).

> "Stakeholders were able to clearly explain how analysis and verification lead to more effective FMs."

Effective mechanisms seem to display all of the features covered in this proposition. However, in addition to what is already covered in the content of the proposition, the most effective mechanisms seem also to be better at synching feedback verification, analysis and reporting with other periodic monitoring, reporting and decision-making processes in the organisation. In turn, this seems to increase the chances that recipients' feedback is seen by the relevant users in a position to follow it up and take action. This is where attention is turned when analysing the next proposition on feedback acknowledgement, response and use.

Revised FM effectiveness proposition 5 on verification and analysis of feedback information

A humanitarian feedback mechanism – and one that falls within the scope of this study – is more effective if:

- feedback data is disaggregated based on the nature of feedback and complaints received (for instance smaller issues versus more serious or programmatic / strategic issues);
- data quality is ensured (including through logging, sorting, checking, analysing and synthesising feedback data as appropriate);
- feedback data is processed and shared paying attention to the user who will receive this information, and who is expected to use it.

In addition, a feedback mechanism is more effective if verification and analysis of feedback information is synched and aligned with other periodic monitoring, reporting and decision-making processes.

3.6 FM effectiveness proposition 6: feedback acknowledgement, response and use

The initial proposition to test was formulated as follows:

A humanitarian feedback mechanism – and one that falls within the scope of this study – is more effective if:

- agency staff / field staff (and other staff such as community focal points and volunteers) acknowledge the feedback received from users;
- agency staff / field staff act on or refer feedback received to the relevant party (within or external to the field project team, and, if needed, external to the organisation);
- relevant actors (e.g. other departments within the organisation, project partners; national authorities etc.) receive, acknowledge, and respond to feedback information so that changes can be made at the appropriate level.

This proposition was explored to understand whether those feedback mechanisms which are effective in acknowledging, responding to and using feedback from aid recipients are also those which are seen as being more successful overall.

This proposition is rather broad in scope as it covers some distinct but interrelated elements and steps in the feedback handling process briefly described below:

Feedback acknowledgement: this loosely came out from the literature and is seen as encompassing three dimensions: one (more intangible) characterising the act of listening, communicating respectfully, and paying attention to the interlocutors; a second (also intangible) relating to the practice of listening to feedback and giving responses or clarification on the spot as much as possible (as was observed in many cases during the field visit in Sudan, for instance); and a third, relating to the practice of 'acknowledging' feedback by way of ensuring it gets recorded appropriately, and that those who submitted it are made aware of which steps can and will, or cannot, be taken in following up feedback. The interviews with FM stakeholders (agency staff and implementing partners) underscored that 'acknowledging' feedback is often understood as trying to capture and document feedback in its 'entirety', and in all cases, even when feedback does not directly concern their agencies, or the programme area covered by their assistance they provide.

Feedback response and use: when agencies and case study participants discussed 'feedback response', it was clarified that responding to feedback does not necessarily mean that the requests or instances that have been submitted through the feedback channel are all going to be satisfied, or even that they can possibly be satisfied. It seems there is a continuum of feedback response actions that range from:

- responding to feedback by clarifying why or why not a programme, an agency or a cluster can or cannot help in satisfying certain requests or suggestions to change some elements of the response, and being transparent as to what can be achieved by a programme or agency
- responding to feedback by making some changes in targeting criteria and selection of eligible programme participants and aid recipients
- responding to feedback by using it to make actual, tangible changes in the type and quality of assistance provided or aid delivery.

To gather information on this proposition, the research team tried to document whether and how feedback information circulates within the agency itself before being acted on (leading, for example, to changes of specifications of activities or services provided, changes in eligibility and selection criteria), and how and to what degree these changes were then communicated to aid recipients.

The researchers also tried to document instances in which agencies have established procedures to maintain some level of confidentiality in their feedback handling process (e.g. when following up and verifying feedback). One area in which the evidence gathered remains rather limited, and which agencies are still looking into – often intermittently – is that of capturing the levels of aid recipients' satisfaction with follow-up and response.

Describing and explaining the pattern

Across the case studies we could observe a 'weak' pattern between the effective functioning of a feedback mechanism and the degree to which feedback is acknowledged, responded to and used.

However, the correlation is not very neat because one of the FM cases that was rated as effective (Sudan) was only seen as moderately strong in this area. In practice, it appeared that all three cases were similar in the degree to which they acknowledged, used and responded to formal feedback, although they differed in overall effectiveness. This could indicate that there is no real connection between this proposition and effectiveness. However, the narrative analysis provided an alternative explanation. This is that aid programmes that are managed in a more responsive and participatory manner, may be in a position to meet the needs of affected populations by adapting their programmes, activities, service delivery – with or without relying on a formally established feedback mechanism. This may be because the programme itself may have strong enough and well-established practiced to collect, respond and handle feedback; as part of its monitoring and MEAL functions for instance.[26]

In the following paragraphs these alternative explanations are considered, looking at the factors that interviewees highlighted as having an impact on feedback use, how decisions are made based on feedback, and what the challenges are in that respect. The initial FM proposition on feedback acknowledgement, response and use is then revised based on the analysis presented.

Critical factors affecting feedback use

Most of the agency staff interviewed, regardless of how successful they perceived their agencies' feedback mechanisms to be, had very clear ideas of what they saw as the key factors that can facilitate feedback use. The most consistently mentioned were:

- trust in the quality and accuracy of the feedback information presented to them – including reliability of the verification and analysis conducted on the feedback data. (This overlaps and confirms the analysis under the proposition 5)
- the inclusion of affected populations' feedback in the stream of evidence / 'evidence bundle' that is looked at by programme managers and other decision-makers. (This point is expanded in the next paragraph)
- clear communication and reporting lines and good linkages among programmes, operations, communication, and MEAL departments
- regularity and predictability in sharing affected populations' feedback and presenting it to relevant parties
- format chosen, and level of synthesis and details used to present and report on feedback
- capacity to conduct an analysis on the trends in feedback over time
- leadership support (e.g. senior managers take an interest in, ask for, and value

"Most of the agency staff interviewed had very clear ideas of what they saw as the key factors that can facilitate feedback use."

26 This point is elaborated further in section IV, 'What if we don't need (formal) feedback mechanisms at all?'

affected populations' feedback data).

The quotes and excerpts reported below underscore some of these points:

- **'Ensure that when beneficiaries have complaints, when you collect it, it goes to the right person at the right time ... ensure that their voice is really heard ... and they can see the changes' 'We need to ensure that whichever feedback we get from beneficiaries ... if we keep getting similar instances over time ... the information is compared over time'** (Aid agency staff, Haiti).
- **'Beneficiary communications should be an operational tool, and not only a communication tool ... the challenge is how to integrate it into the operation ... this integration should be more systematic ... in the past it has been more ad hoc, that beneficiary communication was discussed at operational meetings'** (Aid agency staff, Haiti).
- **'At this stage I don't see people acting on this type of beneficiary feedback'** (Aid agency staff, Haiti).
- **"Beneficiaries communication information should be part of the discussion at programme design stage.. beneficiaries' voices should be integrated at the design stage.. this should be part of participatory planning ... this has happened in some areas where population was consulted at programme planning stage"**(Aid agency staff, Haiti).
- '**We have the information! Now we need to move towards utilisation'** (Aid agency staff, Haiti).
- **'We need better linkage with programmes'** (Aid agency staff, Haiti).

Agency staff's perspective on how decisions based on aid recipients' feedback are made

During the field visits – unless there was a case of providing information or clarification on the spot – the research team rarely came across cases of aid recipients' feedback acted upon directly and immediately.[27] Several staff in FM supervisor positions explained that guidance is given to field staff and implementing partners to collect and acknowledge receipt of feedback, give information and provide clarification, whenever possible on the spot. This was confirmed by some aid recipients groups: 'there is a women's committee, part of the food distribution committee and I am one of the members ... some issues raised are solved on the spot, others are not solved, but still raised' (FGD with displaced women, IDP camp in South Darfur).

However, while field staff can provide information, they are generally not empowered to make immediate decisions on other types of adjustments and programme changes (for instance on selection, eligibility, and coverage). Rather, the case studies showed that field staff generally acknowledge and document feedback on the spot, and then pass it 'forward' to their peers for validation and cross-checking (as discussed in the IOM / Shelter Cluster Pakistan case study), or 'upwards' to the programme managers, and / or other M&E or MEAL staff (as shown in the WV Sudan case study).

27 The only case is possibly Oxfam America's work through community committees in South Darfur. Quote: 'We make use of a committee management system. This is made of community committees. They are trained to run the water operation. So when it comes to feedback and complaints, they do the clarification themselves!'. 'They have a telephone number (on the model of a hotline) and it is used for troubleshooting' (FGD with senior management staff, Khartoum).

In the cases where the research team observed that the feedback was acknowledged, documented, responded to, and acted upon, they tried to map the process that led to utilisation. It appeared that taking action based on affected populations' feedback, or addressing issues that are brought to aid agencies' attention through feedback channels, is not only about feedback itself, or its specific content. Rather, it seems that taking action based on the recipients' feedback depends on whether and how this type of information is entered and featured in other sets of qualitative and quantitative data (or "evidence bundles") from various sources, channels, and reporting lines. These sets of information are then looked at for different purposes including monitoring, assessment, communication, advocacy, coordination and operational decision-making.

It appears that taking action based on feedback calls for the larger effort of looking at different sources of information, triangulating sources and using both quantitative and qualitative information. Such information includes but is not limited to that coming from feedback channels.

This composite set of information has been used, for instance, to:

- inform technical redesign of temporary shelter and future planning and delivery of large-scale shelter interventions (example from IFRC and other Participants National Societies (PNS) in Haiti, see Haiti case study)
- strengthen the arguments presented to donors and other internal and external stakeholders for programme modification (examples from IOM / Shelter Cluster (see Pakistan case study) WFP and WV in the Sudan case study)
- substantiate the points used for advocacy purposes around livelihood support intervention in Sudan (example from Oxfam America in the Sudan case study).

In these examples, aid recipients' feedback data did contribute to decision-making, but it generally did so when it was looked at in conjunction with other information coming from technical reports, HH surveys, field observations, post-distribution monitoring and market surveys, etc.[28] In this sense, recipients' feedback can act as a sort of signal to alert programme managers that some changes may be warranted in the programme or operation within which the FM is anchored. These 'signals' coming from the affected population can then be further explored and documented using other sources of information, and corroborated by verifying them and following them up with aid affected populations themselves.

In a nutshell, the key point is that the research team did not come across any significant action, corrective measures or programme modifications that were decided on and implemented without multiple streams of evidence coming into play. Feedback from affected populations tends to be only one of the streams of information and data considered. This is also in line with the observations made earlier under proposition 5 on verification and analysis of feedback data.

28 According to one staff member, these initial amounts were also chosen to ease cash transactions since the amounts can be rounded up and no loose change was necessary.

The studies documented cases in which unsolicited feedback had been gathered, verified, analysed, triangulated, corroborated by additional evidence and used to inform some changes or corrective measures (see list of examples of feedback use provided in the case study summaries in Section I). However, it appears that feedback is more likely to be used when it is gathered, verified, and analysed in response to specific questions that decision-makers ask (see the example in Box 3.3); or questions they are likely to have as programmes unfold and operational contexts change. Two examples would be:

- World Vision's use of recipients' feedback to support the case for introducing milling vouchers in the context of the food assistance operation in South Darfur; and
- IFRC's use of affected populations' feedback (on their perceptions of security and use of the shelter) to support the case for changes in the design and structure of emergency shelters in post-earthquake Port-au-Prince.

Box 3.3 Example of feedback use from the IOM One-Room Shelter (ORS) programme in Pakistan

Changes in the payment amounts to support the construction of shelters in rural Sindh. The total cash payment for shelter construction per household is 26,000 rupees. Initially, ORS payments were disbursed to participating households in the following amounts: 6,000, then 10,000 and finally 10,000 rupees.[29] What IOM soon learned from conversations with villagers is that many households did not have sufficient funds left from the first tranche (the smallest) to buy lime. Consequently, when they used the second tranche to buy the lime it did not have enough time to slake. ORS staff realised that giving people a larger amount right from the start helps to ensure that they will use lime throughout all the construction steps. According to programme staff, 'We decided to put a little more money in their hands. In Phase I, the amount was a bit arbitrary, later it was a process of trial and error and learning and adjusting'.

The changes were informed by feedback gathered from affected populations and implementing partners after the enrolment of the first 5,000 households. Villagers also reported that 6,000 rupees was not enough to build a strong foundation (first step) and that 10,000 is not enough for the roofing. ORS staff collated the aggregated feedback and data from monitoring visits and shared it with the senior management, suggesting a switch to the following amounts in payment tranches: 8,000 (once the plinth has been constructed), then 8,000 (for construction of walls) and a final amount of 10,000 rupees (for roof construction). Community members felt that the revised payment schedule and amounts were a lot more realistic and feasible. An ORS staff member summarised their feedback in this way, 'The increase in the initial amount allowed them to buy more materials and gave them a boost of confidence right from the start. Some were not sure that IOM would actually come through given how small the first payment was in the past!'.

Source: Source: Pakistan case study

28 More detailed examples of feedback use are included in the case study summaries in Section I.

Aid recipients' perspectives

When gathering observations and insights related to this proposition, the ALNAP-CDA team sought examples from affected populations of whether they expected to see anything changing after submitting some feedback (or complaints) to the aid agencies, and what changes they might expect.

One observation can be highlighted here. In all contexts visited, affected populations seem to be more aware of and have more clarity on the smaller changes made to activities and service delivery (e.g. changes in delivery schedules and specifications of material aid) than on larger, more strategic changes. While programme and strategy redesign did occur, and feedback contributed to it, these changes do not seem to have been communicated and presented to affected populations in a way that clarified how their views, comments, feedback and complaints were used. Arguably, this may also affect whether affected populations would use the feedback mechanisms again.

Moreover, confidence in accessing and making use of feedback channels would possibly grow if aid recipients received follow-up to feedback they had submitted, even if their feedback called for programme redesign or larger strategic changes that would take long to implement (e.g. new directions in the use of funding to support protection, or support livelihood interventions in the context of protracted crisis).

In conclusion

The relevance of this proposition was supported by the observations and analysis conducted, and the feedback mechanisms that appeared more successful at responding to and using feedback were those carrying out all of the actions spelled out in the original proposition (e.g. agency staff acknowledge the feedback received, feedback received is passed on and referred to relevant actors etc.). However, in some cases these activities were not taking place within the FM itself, but as part of the broader management and functioning of the programme.

In addition, the mechanisms that seem more effective at using and responding to feedback are also those in which recipients' feedback information enters a composite stream of evidence and information (qualitative and quantitative) that is looked at by decision-makers.

Revised FM effectiveness proposition 6 on feedback acknowledgement, response and use

A feedback mechanism – and one that falls within the scope of this study – is more effective if:

- agency staff acknowledge the feedback received from users and pass it on, refer

it to the relevant parties (within or external to the programme within which the feedback originated and, if needed, external to the agency)
- information generated from the feedback mechanisms enters and is featured in the evidence bundle used for decision-making, assessment, advocacy, etc. so that changes can be made at the appropriate level
- Recipients' feedback data is featured and referred to in relevant intra-agency communication (e.g. among programmes, operations, communication and MEAL departments) and, as relevant, in communication with other external actors.

3.7 FM effectiveness proposition 7: individual and organisational support

The initial proposition the research team aimed to test was:

A humanitarian feedback mechanism – and one that falls within the scope of this study – is more effective if: the feedback mechanism is run by staff (and sometimes implementing partners and volunteers) with the relevant competencies and attitudes; and the mechanism is run by staff within an agency that supports and values giving and receiving feedback as part of general management practice, and makes the necessary resources available for running the feedback mechanism.

Describing and explaining the pattern

This proposition called for testing of whether a feedback mechanism is more effective if it is run by staff within an agency that supports and values giving and receiving feedback as part of general management practice (and so is comfortable with the idea of feedback) and which makes resources available to develop and maintain the mechanism's work. Given the breadth of issues involved, the analysis has been structured by covering, first, the issues relating to the support given to staff and individuals involved in running the feedback mechanisms, to then cover the issues related to training and skills development needs that case study participants pointed out. Finally, this segment of analysis concludes looking at broader organisational issues, including organisational structures and location of FM in the broader programme and organisation charts.

In general terms, the correlation between the content of this proposition and overall FM effectiveness appears to be relatively strong because the most effective mechanisms observed also displayed a stronger presence of the features and markers relating to individual and organisation support given to the FM. Conversely, the lowest-performing FM examples were those displaying the weakest presence of the features and markers indicating well-founded individual and organisational support to the mechanism.

" **agency staff, and even aid recipients in some cases, highlighted the importance of individual and organisational support to sustain FM work** "

The interviews further suggest that this is more than just a correlation. Across all the three cases documented, agency staff, and even aid recipients in some cases, highlighted the importance of individual and organisational support to sustain FM work, and how relevant this is factor for the overall FM effectiveness. Individual and organisational support makes an important contribution to the effectiveness of the mechanism.

Indeed, this type of support is important to any element of a humanitarian programme. Nonetheless, individual skills and capacity support appear to be particularly important for feedback mechanisms, because they make up for gaps in institutional support given to establishing and running feedback mechanisms. In the case studies, the researchers saw that:

- establishing a feedback mechanism could, in most of the cases observed, be ascribed to the input and efforts of a handful of individuals who carved some space for it (bottom-up) and who are seldom supported by their reports and senior management
- the atomistic and fragmented nature of recipients' feedback led to the need to sort and analyse feedback data that in turn led to an increased workload
- the lack of clear procedures and good practice to support sorting, grouping, analysing, synthesising and reporting on individual and group feedback again left it to dedicated individuals to 'make sense' of the feedback received
- recipients' feedback handling often seems to be added on top of other functions (e.g. monitoring, communication, programme quality and accountability oversight etc.) and it is not clearly 'housed' in a job family / functional category. As a result, there was an element of voluntarism in taking on the work of feedback handling.

Individual support issues – aid recipient's perspectives

It was striking to see how the aid recipients themselves, in all three contexts visited, brought to our attention how they appreciated the work done by staff in FM daily implementation / implementing partners' positions (e.g. community facilitators and community liaison officers in Haiti, volunteer Community Help Desk staff in the IDP camps in Sudan, Shelter Cluster focal point staff in rural Sindh in Pakistan etc.). In particular, they appreciated the dependability and trustworthiness of the staff (e.g. in channelling feedback complaints, requests) and appreciated their work in maintaining face-to-face interactions with them.

- **'We are thankful to the IPs [implementing partners] because we know this district is not safe. The main security concern is kidnapping for ransom ... that's why they are thankful to the IPs that they still come'** (Village residents receiving non-food-item assistance, North Sindh, Pakistan).
- In Haiti, most strikingly, aid recipients also reflected on the fact that staff in these positions should be more or better supported in their role of facilitating communication and relaying information back to the community on an ongoing basis.
- **'Aid agencies could give more motivation to community agents and facilitators ... they [aid agency] should tell all their staff that they do a good job ... [community agents] should be supported in the job they do!'** (Community members from rural areas around Leogane, Haiti).

Individual support issues – agency staff's perspective on support needs and challenges in FM work

Agency staff in designer / owner and FM supervisor positions in both Sudan and Pakistan reflected on the fact that running a feedback mechanism can put a strain on human resources, and requires ongoing on-the-job support, as well as skills development support and opportunities (e.g. Shelter Cluster staff and ORS staff in Pakistan; INA programme staff in Haiti).

- **'Sometimes I feel like I am running an M&E academy … we would have lost so many national staff … if we don't do something to retain staff ... we need to bring them up to speed with the English language needed for reporting, for instance … and then we do coaching on-the-job and mentoring'** (Agency staff, Sudan).

Across all programmes, contexts and agencies visited, the main point mentioned by agency staff interviewees (from senior management to daily FM supervisors) is that analytical skills and data synthesis and reporting skills are absolutely crucial and that this is where there is often a gap. As discussed under some of the previous propositions, these skills are critical to transforming the raw feedback data gathered through different channels and tools, into information that is accurate, can be trusted, and can be actioned. This is also in line with what was discussed for FM effectiveness proposition 5 on verification and analysis of feedback information.

- **'There are two things that can go very wrong in an accountability system [which includes feedback and complaints handling] … One: you let go; or two: you build a false alarm … We have analytical skills … like 007 ... as we need to investigate … we have a system to check information and we have a number to directly call the interested parties'** (Agency staff – INGO in Islamabad, Pakistan).

The Pakistan case is striking because human resources and skills-related issues were consistently mentioned as a top priority when the researchers asked which aspect of the FM could be better supported to then have a more successful feedback mechanism.

- **'The human aspect is key … Since we are at the receiving end, we need to be able to reassure about confidentiality … we consider a complaint true … until proven otherwise'** (FGD with MEAL staff (with complaints and feedback handlings, and feedback mechanism oversight functions) at I-NGO office in Islamabad, Pakistan) .
- **'We would like to do more training for our field monitors, and one of the points I always repeat is "Record observations! Record observations! Record observations!" ... some of the most critical skills that are missing are observation skills and critical thinking skills'** (I-NGO agency staff in assessment and M&E position (with FM design and supervision functions), Islamabad, Pakistan).
- **'You don't study MEAL courses at university … we hire from agencies who are familiar with the protocol, and then we do on-the-job training and we invest in capacity-building ... Leadership style in the agency will influence how you hire … for instance we conduct diversity analysis … in order to ensure there is balance and diversity in terms of both geographical provenance and affiliation ... this is key to help better contextualise our actions … as they know better how to break the culture of silence ... also, there is a lot of peer learning among staff'** (I-NGO agency staff (with FM design and supervision functions), Pakistan).

Another support issue that was frequently mentioned – particularly in Pakistan and Haiti – relates to skills and competencies of partners and the overall support that is given to them to support FM work:

- **'Having skilled human resources is key. Where would we invest? In a strong network of implementing partners and strong IP focal points'** (National staff – Shelter Cluster in Sindh, Pakistan).
- **'Think about implementing partners! Think that they are doing their work on a voluntary basis ... implementing partners would make a feedback mechanism more effective, because they are well connected, because they come from the local areas, and you can get accurate information ... Humanitarian agencies can use IPs if they don't have access during the next emergencies, if there is insecurity**' (FGD Shelter Cluster focal points – Pakistan).

Staff capacity and skill support issues

Most of the key informants – particularly agency staff in FM supervisor positions and staff daily implementer positions – clearly articulated how they saw both organisational and individual support factors contributing to FM effectiveness. The observations shared with the research team concerning this proposition varied greatly. However, the general pattern was that informants suggested that there were a series of (fairly consistent) things (listed below) that organisations could do to support FM work, and that if organisations did not take action on these fronts, the motivation and skills of individual staff members then became crucial to fill the gap. When asked whether any elements relating to organisational and individual support impact on the overall functioning of the feedback mechanisms, the issues most frequently mentioned included:

- availability of on-the-job training and coaching opportunities (all cases)
- support from a highly functional M&E system (all cases)
- staff retention (all cases)
- opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and rotation in the different roles and tasks involved in maintaining a feedback mechanism (Sudan and Pakistan in particular)
- availability of funding for dedicated FM positions (Haiti in particular)
- senior staff acting as role models to infuse a culture of sharing and openness in the organisation (Pakistan in particular).

In general, the research team noted that the most effective FM cases seem to be those working within programmes and organisations that i) display smoother internal communication, ii) display a way of working that reflects more clearly defined mutual expectations among peers, between programme staff and management, and between operational and non-operational programmes and departments, and iii) encourage and support on-the-job learning and skills building through learning-by-doing approaches.

Sustaining feedback mechanisms work: Who are the champions?

All in all, the most solid examples of functioning FMs and those with the strongest practices of FM support are those where the individual leadership skills and capacities of the FM designers / owners found fertile ground in a programme and organisation that made space for feedback handling functions to develop and grow.

In all agencies visited, it was striking to note that it was almost always possible to trace the establishment of the feedback mechanisms back to the inputs, know-how and motivation of just a handful of individuals.

In all the three host agencies, those individuals, moving from post to post, had brought with them some experience of MEAL work from their previous field postings. This included, for instance, awareness and practice of field-level accountability work, participatory monitoring and evaluation, two-way communication, do-no-harm analysis etc.

They often reflected on their attempts to incorporate these notions during the design and establishment phase of the feedback mechanism. They also often referred to having to present some 'business case' arguments to their senior managers to rally support and attract resources for the FM.

- **"For us, in order to get organisation support in the form of investments in the MEAL system [which includes the feedback mechanism] it was crucial, first of all to build the evidence for ourselves, for the work that we were doing. We had to pilot the system ... we struggled to justify our existence and our role! During the pilot, for six months we gathered evidence to make a business case! ... Donors were also interested in the system... and by generating the evidence for our work they could build a case... to get funding to sustain MEAL work, the proposal-writing stage is extremely critical ... we they make sure the MEAL strategy is inserted in the proposal."** (Aid agency staff, Pakistan).

Those champions are often at the mid-level of seniority. They showed an ability to act as the link between teams and support staff working more closely with the communities, and the senior programme managers and decision-makers in the organisations.

It was not always clear whether organisations had systems in place to support the roles those individuals play in relation to the feedback mechanism. Most concerning, perhaps, was to note the general absence of systems and procedures to capture and retain their institutional memory and know-how about the FM, so it would not be lost when they rotated or left their positions. The next paragraph delves further into other issues relating to organisation support, starting with budgeting and resource allocation.

Organisational support issues – resource and cost dimensions of setting up and operating feedback mechanisms

When exploring issues of FM individual and organisational support, the cost implications of resourcing FM work were mentioned during all three visits, but not always in great detail. The issue of funding positions for dedicated staff to work on different aspects of the feedback handling process – from data gathering, to data analysis, to communication support etc. – has been often mentioned as a challenge, particularly by FM supervisors and staff in designer / owner positions.

- **'There are a lot of missed opportunities … because for instance there is funding available for monitoring and for household surveys that could be better used also for beneficiary feedback mechanism purposes'** (Director of donor office, Islamabad).
- **'To strengthen skills required for the feedback mechanisms is not a problem of budget … it is a problem of finding someone who can offer that type of training … these days I would really like to send my teams through conflict resolution training, for instance'** (Programme manager, aid agency, Haiti).
- **'Beneficiary feedback mechanism is a trend … but often for local NGOs it is only a sticker with a number … in the case of international NGOs, some of their partners have their mechanisms … but they also have human resources issues to run the hotlines, for instance…'** (Senior representative at donor office, Islamabad).
- **'We are developing a communication and accountability mechanism there, because Haiti is the only country where we could afford to support this work – where they had funding to resource this work. This included being able to allocate funding to create a [dedicated] position'** (Programme officer, aid agency, Haiti).
- **'Our work on communication with affected populations was initially self-funded, then we got support from the Emergency Response Fund, then through a donor'** (Agency staff in senior management position in Islamabad, Pakistan).

The analysis underscored that the most effective FM cases seem to be those working within programmes and organisations that:

- display smoother internal communication
- display a way of working that reflects more clearly defined mutual expectations among peers; between programme staff and management; and between operational and non-operational programmes and departments; and
- encourage and support on-the-job learning and skills building through learning-by-doing approaches.

Observations on resourcing FM work in relation to its institutional location

The different agencies visited have followed various approaches to funding and resourcing FM work. Generally, this issue seems connected to that of institutional design, and location of feedback handling functions within the broader programme and agency organograms.

For instance, some agencies have been supporting FM work through staff regularly employed with other programme-related responsibilities (e.g. assessment, coordination, programme monitoring, as seen in the WV Sudan case). Other agencies have been funding FM work through positions that are not part of programme management / programme implementation functions but of other 'central services' and support functions (such as communication and advocacy – partly seen in the Haiti and Pakistan cases).

Some key informants discussed the location of the FM functions (e.g. feedback collection and handling) as part of operational programmes and departments, as opposed to central services, as a critical issue impacting on financing and budgeting FM work. However, the research team is not in a position to give a firm indication of which FM location carries better funding and budgeting prospects for a feedback mechanism. This is because there have been cases of functioning and relatively well-supported FMs located both inside and outside operational programmes.

Comparing across cases, it is in Haiti where the establishment and practice of feedback collection and feedback handling appear more formalised and institutionalised through the funding of dedicated positions such as beneficiary communication officers and managers; feedback database officers; and accountability, monitoring, evaluation and learning officers with specific responsibilities for feedback system design and oversight etc.

Availability of funding for feedback and complaints collection, as well as for communication-specific activities, has perhaps brought a certain level of 'projectisation' of feedback handling. This means for instance that feedback mechanisms are presented as 'stand-alone' projects with their own budget lines allocation, and specialised staff support. Although noticeable in all three contexts visited, it was slightly more prominent in Haiti, which has been regarded by many as a laboratory for many of the more recent innovations in communication and complaints and response mechanisms with crisis-affected populations.[30]

It remains unclear whether such a projectisation trend has a positive influence on how effectively feedback is handled and how effectively it is used for performance improvement and accountability purposes. Such analysis goes beyond the scope of this study; nevertheless, Section IV provides space to touch on a series of issues – such as projectisation and formalisation of feedback handling – that are emerging in the general discussion on feedback effectiveness.

In conclusion

The relevance of this proposition was supported by the observations and analysis conducted. Not only is there a correlation, but stakeholders clearly articulated how solid individual and organisational support to FMs leads to more effective mechanisms. At the same time – and rather paradoxically – there was also a feeling among some interviewees that too much organisational support could lead to over-formalisation of the mechanism, and make it less effective.

“There was also a feeling among some interviewees that too much organisational support could lead to over-formalisation of the mechanism.”

Effective mechanisms seem to display all of the features covered in this proposition. However, in addition to what is already covered in the content of the proposition, the most effective mechanisms seem also to be those that:

30 See, for instance, Chandran and Thow, 2013; and Chapelier and Shah, 2013.

- value and support the role that implementing partners can play in sustaining FM work
- value and support the role played by key individuals in FM designer / owner positions
- take a closer look at where feedback mechanism functions are located within a programme and in the organisation to enable more informed decisions about its funding and overall sustainability.

When revising the content of this proposition in the light of the analysis conducted, it was apparent how much ground needs to be covered concerning the individual and organisational support required for an FM to work effectively. The practitioners' guidance presented in Section V of this study will take this into account and present several pointers covering the different areas requiring dedicated attention by programme managers, monitoring and MEAL team leaders, and staff in FM designer / owner positions.

Revised FM effectiveness proposition 7 on individual and organisational support

A humanitarian feedback mechanism – and one that falls within the scope of this study – is more effective if:

- the mechanism is run by staff with the relevant attitudes, skills and competencies (particularly for feedback data analysis, synthesis and reporting)
- whenever possible, opportunities are harnessed for collaboration and joint work with partners who are also supported in their FM-related functions.
- In addition, a mechanism is more effective if it is run by staff within an agency that: supports and values giving and receiving feedback as part of general communication within teams, and between operational and non-operational teams and programmes makes the necessary resources available for running the feedback mechanism.

4

Additional observations

4.1 What if we don't need (formal) feedback mechanisms at all?

Issues concerning the desirability of organising feedback collection and utilisation practices in more structured and formalised ways were evident in many conversations held during the field visits. This issue emerged, for instance, when the research team looked at data collection practices, at the cultural and context appropriateness of feedback mechanisms, and at a host of issues related to expectation-setting and knowledge in establishing a feedback mechanism.

- **'There is no formal complaint mechanism for WASH … [the implementing partners] use "Village sanitation committees" to follow up on issues … but the mechanism remains informal'** (Senior agency staff in coordination position, Pakistan).
- **'Community committees [receive guidance to] deal with it, to deal with the issue on the spot … If you do it, beneficiaries don't need to resort to using the radio [to attract attention]. They have a telephone number (on the model of a hotline) and it is used for troubleshooting … The telephone line is also often used beyond providing feedback or asking information, also to inform our agency about security issues in the camp (e.g. telling them not to go on a specific day if the security situation is volatile'** (Country director, I-NGO, Sudan).

Many agencies reported that they resorted to setting up formalised feedback systems because security considerations made it impossible to maintain consistent and regular contact with communities. In this sense, FMs were used as a 'second best'.

The lack of regular communication with affected populations, and external pressures to demonstrate visible mechanisms for accountability to affected populations, are resulting in an overall trend of formalising feedback processes that may already exist but are deemed unsystematic and hence hard to track and assess (Jean with Bonino, 2013: 30).

However, the ALNAP-CDA team also heard of cases where the desire to 'formalise' a feedback and complaint system has been presented in terms of a desire for more systematic feedback capture and follow-up:

- **'Our ambition is to try to have something more formal, and that does not only arrive at the end of the programme in the form of a survey … but something more concurrent to the programme, something more consistent … more firmly established. We want to have a more formalised system supported by clearer**

processes, that allow us to get information, and to reply to the community as the programme unfolds … not only at the end … asking "did you like it?"

- **'The system should be supported by clearer procedures on how to manage it, and supported by sensitisation actions with both community and agency staff. Our aim is to establish a system that is capable of receiving and dealing with issues related to what is implemented, but is also able to receive unsolicited issues'** (Agency staff (in FM designer / owner position), Haiti).

One concern that has surfaced during some of the interviews with programme managers in FM designer / owner or FM supervisor positions is that more formal mechanisms and tools – such as feedback boxes, call centres, IVR phone lines – can potentially displace more meaningful participation, engagement and accountability. Affected populations' demands, feedback and complaints shared spontaneously on aid-related issues may fall outside the scope of a narrowly defined feedback tool and be lost or undervalued. There is a tension between a demand-side initiated feedback process (such as during face-to-face interactions) and supply-side mechanisms (such as those mentioned above) that can narrowly prescribe the boundaries of what is considered relevant feedback and how it should be handled (Jean with Bonino, 2013: 30).

When looked at from the perspective of aid recipients, the issue of formality and informality of both feedback collection and handling practices appeared rather immaterial – or secondary to three other overarching considerations and concerns they shared with us:

- Preference for in-person communication. Whatever the configuration of the feedback system – more or less formalised – or the area of work of the programme within which the FM is anchored, the expectation is that formalised communication tools and ICT should not replace face-to-face communication opportunities.
- Preference for any means of communication that can guarantee direct access to agency staff, even if not necessarily face-to-face. In the areas with more insecure access, where in-person visits are not often possible, aid recipients themselves flagged their preference for a toll-free call line, or even a postal address to which they can send letters and communicate directly with the agencies.
- Expectation of follow-up. Crisis-affected people have a trust and expectation that, regardless of the communication channels that have been put at their disposal (and how high- or low-ICT content these are), and regardless of what caseload a certain channel is designed to cover, in a situation of need in-person follow-up. 'Somebody will come, if we call, if we ask'. The quote below is indicative of this observation:
- **'People use the complaint hotline to attract attention to other issues … because they know IOM will come and verify'** (National staff – Shelter Cluster, North Sindh, Pakistan).
- **'We think the feedback mechanism [through the Community Help Desk system] is also used as one way to follow up if beneficiaries raise big issues … it gives us an opportunity to raise issues because we know the CHD system goes beyond just WV, but it will reach OCHA as well'** (Women in IDP camp in South Darfur, Sudan.

5

Practitioner guidance on establishing and using effective mechanisms for affected populations in humanitarian contexts

This practitioner guidance is also available as stand-alone document and is available at: www.alnap.org/ourwork/feedback-loop

The following guidance builds on the research presented in the previous pages (a summary overview is also presented in Box 5.1). It aims to support humanitarian organisations in developing and implementing feedback mechanisms. It is addressed in particular to humanitarian agency staff in advisory, programme management, or MEAL positions in headquarter or field-based positions. It offers guidance on:

- which elements should be taken into account when considering whether there is a need to establish a formalised feedback mechanism (FM) for crisis-affected populations; and
- which features should be prioritised when an FM is being designed, set up and maintained on an ongoing basis to ensure the mechanism is working as effectively as possible.

Box 5.1 This action research into feedback mechanisms in a nutshell

The guidance is based on the results of an action research project that looked at different agencies' experiences in setting up and using feedback mechanisms in operational humanitarian contexts. Evidence was gathered through desk research and field visits conducted in Sudan, Pakistan and Haiti. The complete set of research products issued as part of this initiative is available on the ALNAP site at: http://www.alnap.org/ourwork/feedback-loop.

What made this research distinctive was that it systematically asked for and sought to incorporate the views of the feedback mechanism users. The users are first and foremost crisis-affected people and affected populations as well as agency staff and implementing partners. The guidance reflects their aggregate views on whether and how feedback mechanisms work; which features ensure FMs' effectiveness; and what could be done to improve them. In terms of scope, this guidance is most applicable to cases where a feedback mechanism is designed to:

Box 5.1 (cont.) This action research into feedback mechanisms in a nutshell

- operate at a service delivery or programme implementation level
- operate in the context of ongoing humanitarian operations or humanitarian programming, but not necessarily in the immediate phases of relief and response after a sudden-onset crisis
- provide information for adjusting and improving some elements of the actions and services delivered
- deal with a broad caseload of non-sensitive issues (feedback)[31] in addition to sensitive ones (complaints)[32]. Mechanisms designed exclusively to address sexual exploitation and abuse allegations were excluded from this study and related guidance, on the assumption that they may require special design 'features' (such as mechanisms to allow for the collection of evidence that could be used in legal processes) and might address issues of acknowledgement of feedback, validation and anonymity / confidentiality in very specific ways.

Source: Authors

5.1 Finalising a definition of feedback mechanisms in humanitarian contexts

In the light of the research conducted by ALNAP and CDA, the following definition of formal feedback mechanisms in humanitarian contexts is proposed:

A set of procedures and tools formally established and used to allow those benefiting from humanitarian action (and in some cases other crisis-affected populations) to provide information on their experience of a humanitarian agency or of the wider humanitarian system. Feedback mechanisms can function as part of broader monitoring practices and can generate information for decision-making purposes. Feedback mechanisms collect information for a variety of purposes, including taking corrective action in improving some elements of the humanitarian response, and strengthening accountability towards affected populations.

A feedback mechanism is seen as effective if, at minimum, it supports the collection, acknowledgement, analysis and response to the feedback received.

31 In the relevant humanitarian literature, feedback has been defined as including opinions, concerns, suggestions and advice that aid 'agencies may adopt, challenge or disagree with as appropriate' (Baños Smith, 2009:33).

32 Complaints have been defined as 'a specific grievance of anyone who has been negatively affected by an organisation's action or who believes that an organisation has failed to meet a stated commitment' (HAP, 2010:6).

5.2 Guidance

The first two guidance points present key considerations for the initial design to help establish the purpose(s) of a feedback mechanism. In turn, these considerations will influence the overall design of the feedback handling approach and determine whether the best option is a more or less formalised approach.

1. Start by considering the purpose and need for establishing a feedback mechanism, and clarify what the expected uses are of the feedback information generated.

This can be done by asking the following three questions:

> "Start by defining the purpose, expected uses and needs for establishing a feedback mechanism."

- What needs will be met by establishing a feedback mechanism?
- How do you expect to use the feedback?
- Who would need to be able to access and use this information?

Evidence from the case studies shows that there is usually a mix of needs and expectations regarding the purpose of establishing an FM. The table below presents some commonly cited reasons and motivations.

Table 5.1 Establishing the overall purpose and considering the need for establishing a feedback mechanism

Question	Possible purposes of a feedback mechanism, and options / answers to questions about needs that can be addressed through a feed-back mechanism
What are the needs you are try-ing to meet through establishing an FM?	This could include: • understanding programme targeting and performance (as part of broader monitoring system) • enhancing participatory process and affected population empowerment; giving programme participants more power over the programme • reducing monitoring of data gaps and / or substituting for broader monitoring in situations of limited access • identifying abuses • meeting commitments of accountability • ensuring participants have information; aligning agency and participant expectations of the programme • improving acceptance and security of agency in the community.

Question	Possible purposes of a feedback mechanism, and options / answers to questions about needs that can be addressed through a feed-back mechanism
What are the expect-ed uses for such infor-mation?	This could include: • improving the quality of the day-to-day activities / processes used to provide assistance and deliver services • ensuring that aid is reaching the most marginalised • ensuring that targeting is fair and / or perceived as fair • improving targeting and selection of affected populations and programme participants • aligning expectations – clarifying programme objectives and features of programme and delivery to affected populations • improving relevance and responsiveness of assistance provided and service delivered • improving quality or quantity of assistance provided and service delivered; • identifying and gathering information about diversions, misuses, mismanagement or abuses of assistance provided • advocating for needs of affected people • informing future programme design.
Who needs to access and use this informa-tion?	Depending on the feedback content and expectation of follow-up and use, this could include one or more of the following users / stakeholders: • field monitoring teams so that they can be alerted of implementation challenges, access and delivery issues, issues with quality of assistance provided, targeting of eligible population etc. • programme managers based in the field and in capital offices • MEAL coordinators and MEAL teams in the field • PSEA, GBV and protection advisers so that they can be made aware inter alia of situations of abuse, misconduct etc. that need verifying, confidential follow-up, or referral • cluster partner agencies; and / or agencies from other clusters • OCHA and / or other agencies with a cluster or inter-cluster coordination role • local implementing partners • local authorities (could include law enforcement officials) • field monitoring teams and field liaison officers from donor agencies • senior managers; heads of operations • donors' officials in capital and headquarter offices • affected population / those who submitted feedback] see note (*) .

Source: Authors

Note: When establishing who needs to access and use the information generated through FMs, consideration should be given as to how to ensure that relevant information is also shared with the affected population itself. Data on whether, how and how often this happens in reality appears to be rare. In some contexts, new crowdsourcing and open-source platforms can allow affected populations to view the information gathered. Some agencies have designed FM procedures whereby those submitting feedback (including feedback provided during face-to-face meetings with community liaison officers or MEAL staff), are handed a carbon copy or a summary of the feedback they provided. In addition to having access to the data provided, community members could engage in analysing it or making sense of the issues that are flagged through the feedback mechanism. The idea is that if community members are provided with access to this data and engaged in its initial analysis, they can use the data for their own, locally-driven advocacy purposes with other agencies and their local authorities.

Some less common uses of feedback information identified during the case studies included:

- using feedback to look for average trends in how assistance is being provided, perceived, and used – See examples from the Sudan case study
- scanning feedback to look for 'outliers', for indications of diverging uses, new emerging needs, affected populations' priorities and preferences of different groups of users. For example, unsolicited feedback could concern the type of project inputs and assistance provided and what users perceive to be most appropriate for their context– See examples from WV, and Oxfam America in the Sudan case study, and IOM / Shelter Cluster in the Pakistan case study)
- analysing feedback data to understand preferences, uses and behaviours associated with certain actions (e.g. how a relocation programme in post-earthquake Haiti can contribute to supporting livelihood and income-generating opportunities among the programme participants – examples from IFRC Haiti, BRC Haiti and CRS in the Haiti case study)
- extracting 'stories of change' from programme participants that can be used to complement quantitative monitoring reports and progress reports for donors (See example from IOM in the Pakistan case study).

2. Once the overarching purpose and expected uses of a feedback mechanism have been identified, the next decision is whether to opt for a formal or informal approach

The remainder of this guidance focuses on formal approaches to feedback handling. It is important to recognise that both formal and informal approaches to feedback handling present advantages and disadvantages.

Deciding on the most appropriate approach involves asking whether the information that you expect the FM to generate could be collected and channelled through other existing processes such as monitoring and two-way communication practices. Some feedback collection and feedback handling practices may already be embedded in how programme monitoring and MEAL teams work. Informal feedback collection and feedback utilisation practices may already be embedded in the way an agency works with its local counterparts, cluster members, or implementing partners. They may be part of how an agency conducts participatory assessment, design, monitoring and evaluation activities. Both set-ups present advantages and disadvantages, which are highlighted below.

Formal FMs often display the following **advantages:**

- They may attract funding relatively easily because the feedback handling

process is presented as projectised. This means, for instance, that dedicated budget lines can be allocated to carry out discrete and often specialised feedback handling functions such as feedback data entry, database management, data reporting, call centre management etc.
- They can help support the creation of institutional memory and learning by recording and codifying feedback handling steps and processes, for example through including it in orientation, induction, and on-the-job training opportunities.
- They can often handle greater volume of feedback data by, for instance, making greater use of higher-tech communication tools and channels such as SMS-based systems, dedicated call centres, IVR etc.
- They can reach affected people in situations where in-person access may be difficult, and thus help to ensure that a minimum level of two-way communication is maintained.

On the other hand, formal FMs may have the **disadvantages** of:

- higher dependency on discrete budget lines and staffing allocation that risks coming to a halt when the scale of operations decreases
- fragmenting the feedback collection and response functions by making it the purview of only a group of specialised staff, operating in their own 'silo' and disconnected from the operational teams, or from the relevant decision-makers who could act on feedback promptly
- conveying the perception that, by creating a separate team dedicated to feedback collection and response (or to accountability in general), listening and responding to the affected population becomes the job of a particular team, and not everyone's responsibility.

"Formal FMs have a higher dependency on budget lines and staffing allocation that risks coming to a halt when the scale of operations decreases"

Informal feedback handling approaches appear to enjoy the **advantages** of:

- being more responsive to changes in the programme and in the operational context. This is usually because such informal approaches tend to be embedded into the inner workings of a programme (most often within monitoring functions) and tend to rely heavily on regular in-person communication with local implementing partners, community representatives and affected populations
- strengthening the quality and nature of the relationships between agency and affected populations by, for instance, increasing trust and collaboration between agencies and communities.

On the other hand, **informal feedback** handling approaches may have the **drawbacks** of:

- making it harder to systematise the procedures for feedback collection, documentation, verification and analysis process. This, in turn, impinges on the possibility of tracking responses, analysing trends and reporting on them over time
- excessive reliance on the know-how of individual team leaders and team

members (e.g. monitoring and MEAL teams) with facilitation, conflict resolution, and listening and communication skills. This can make these systems hard to sustain and to scale up across teams, programmes and operations

- making feedback handling processes less predictable because they are often hitched to the relationship of trust built with specific individuals, and not to institutional systems. Staff leaving or rotating from their positions risks loss of feedback channels and two-way communication because of the lack of more predictable procedures
- relying mainly on in-person communication, which can make it difficult to handle large volumes of data and to gather data in situations of constrained access
- arguably being less receptive to innovations in humanitarian ICT and affected populations' communication, which can limit the scale of these informal systems and their ability to reach communities that are in situations of constrained access or supported by large-scale operations across a broad geographical area.

> **Informal feedback mechanisms can make it harder to systematise feedback collection, documentation, verification and analysis**

One of the aspects on which there doesn't (yet) seem to be enough or conclusive evidence is whether certain types of programme and operation contexts call for one set-up or the other. Nevertheless, some features that seem to characterise those agencies and programmes that, rely more on informal feedback handling approaches than on formal FMs. If your team, programme or operation decides to opt for an informal feedback handling approach, it is useful to highlight that successful informal systems are built and rely on:

- strong trust and solid relationship of collaboration with implementing partners (local and international) on information-sharing and monitoring of programmes and service delivered
- regular, unimpeded access to the population either by INGO or local partner
- strong cohesion and clarity of objectives, roles and responsibilities within the monitoring / M&E / MEAL teams
- availability of resources (financial and staffing) to support monitoring / M&E / MEAL teams within which informal feedback handling often occurs
- high levels of information exchange within the monitoring / M&E / MEAL teams, and between these teams and senior programme management
- high levels of empowerment of monitoring / M&E / MEAL teams to respond to and address feedback received on the spot and on the ground as much as possible
- the aspiration and desire to monitor not only the use of aid and resources provided, but also related behaviour changes in the affected populations and programme participants, in a continuous manner over longer periods of time; for instance, monitoring use and behaviour changes brought about by livelihood support or recovery interventions in the contexts of protracted crisis or high vulnerability (e.g. increased awareness of DRR-behaviours in the populations receiving shelter and reconstruction assistance).

3. Once an agency has decided to establish a new feedback mechanism, or formalise existing feedback handling practices, the overarching purpose and expected uses of the mechanism will influence other key aspects such as its location within programme and organisation structures, functions and organograms.

This is an area in which there isn't (yet) sufficient or conclusive evidence concerning where in the organisation the FM should be located in different programmes and contexts. Nevertheless, from existing and limited evidence, it is possible to highlight two broad options.

The first option is locating the FM in a central unit or department which is not involved in the day-to-day programme delivery, such as a unit dealing with MEAL and quality assurance for the whole operation, country office, or central communication and advocacy department. This allows staff to share and report on feedback received across functions and programmes, and better capture and sharing of feedback on cross-cutting issues. The main drawback is insularity and detachment from programme managers and the realities and changes of day-to-day implementation. Moreover, locating responsibility for the mechanisms outside the programme function makes it harder to ensure that feedback reporting is timely, so that programme managers and field teams receive relevant and actionable feedback reports frequently enough to be in synch with the fast pace characterising many humanitarian operations.

The second main design option is to locate the FM within a team, unit or department involved in day-to-day programme delivery and operations. This can compensate for some of the drawbacks outlined for the first design option. Nonetheless, this alternative can also create another kind of insularity – that of the over-specialisation of feedback handling in a specific programme area or sector of operation (for example, food assistance) but not other programmes implemented or clusters operating in the same location. This may reduce attentiveness to capturing and analysing feedback data that may be relevant for cross-cutting issues.

The following three guidance points cover the main issues related to the set-up of a formal feedback mechanism, including establishing which communication channels will be used and who they will be accessed by.

4. It is key to identify which communication tools and channels are commonly used, preferred, and well understood in a given context by the people expected to give feedback (including women and other vulnerable or marginalised groups).

Feedback mechanisms usually rely on a mix of tools ranging from in-person visits to higher-tech, digital, or SMS-based systems. It is useful to distinguish between two types of communication tools and channels and highlight the possible advantages and disadvantage of each set:

- The first is a set of communication tools and channels already established as part of the programme or service delivery within which the FM is anchored. These often rely on periodic in-person visits and on the use of monitoring, assessment and survey tools such as household (HH) questionnaires, or post-distribution monitoring forms, logbooks, community meetings part of programme implementation and service delivery processes.

- The second is a set of communication tools and channels that are specifically established as a new addition to the options given (complementing the first set of tools) to affected populations and programme participants to get in touch with the agencies to provide unsolicited comments, feedback, pass on information, ask questions or thank the agencies. These tools and channels often rely on platforms (e.g. mobile and digital services) and support tools (suggestion boxes, radio, SMS messaging) that allow the handling of greater volumes of communication and feedback data without requiring face-to-face communication.

The table takes a comparative look at the two sets of communication tools and channels from a feedback handling perspective.

Table 5.2 Considering the appropriate mix of communication tools and channels

	Examples	Potential advantages from a feedback handling perspective	Potential disadvantages from a feedback handling perspective
a. Communication channels already part of programme delivery	Community or village-level meetings before or after aid distribution. In-person visits at household level as part of field monitoring. In-person visits and focus group discussions as part of assessment. Assessment surveys conducted at HH-level. Post-distribution surveys conducted at HH-level etc.	Channels and tools are already known and maintained as an integral part of how activities are carried out and monitored. Affected populations and local implementing partners may already be familiar with the tools. Depth of the qualitative information provided. Provide information helpful to track change over time with greater details and focus on individual stories of change.	Often requires more regular presence and access to the population. High staffing requirements. Requires interviewing and listening skills to collect information and answers given to open-ended questions (as opposed to numeric survey questionnaires). Requires specific data analysis skills adequate to the type of data gathered.

	Examples	Potential advantages from a feedback handling perspective	Potential disadvantages from a feedback handling perspective
b. Other tools and channels established specifically to support FM work	Comment and suggestion boxes. Using radio programme with call-in service Provision of toll-free mobile phone lines. Integrated Voice Response (IVR) technology applied to mass SMS messaging. Encouraging written letters mailed directly to the agency office. Encouraging in-person visits to the agency office during designated drop-in hours.	Some tools can handle a large volume of information. They can integrate and support the work done through in-person visits and monitoring visits. Can be helpful in situations where access is constrained. Can be the preferred channel if they offer anonymity in cases of sensitive feedback (about staff / partner misconduct or corruption, or SEA).	Affected populations and local implementing partners may not be familiar with the tools and require continuous briefing and sensitisation to their use. 'Atomisation' / 'fragmentation' of feedback across different tools which produce raw data in 'incomparable formats' (e.g. suggestion box logbook, digital communication via SMS). Some tools require dedicated capacity with technical know-how not always available (e.g. database management). If not used to integrating with in-person communication, digital technology tools can potentially replace face-to-face communication or displace informal channels. Requires specific data analysis skills not only to manage feedback data entry and database management, but also to 'make sense of the data'.

Source: Authors

5. Selecting feedback channels

You should:

- consider whether and how different population groups (men, women, children, the elderly, marginalised and vulnerable groups and individuals) have the opportunity to access at least some of the communication tools established or used by the agencies to support two-way communication with affected populations
- ensure that you have thought through how information from these various sources will be validated and analysed (see below)
- ensure that you have the resources (financial, staffing and skills) for collecting and analysing information from the sources (see staffing point below)
- identify other channels which may have been established by other agencies or bodies, and consider how these can be integrated with the programme, to prevent duplication and confusion.

> “
> **confidentiality of communication should be guaranteed as appropriate**
> ”

Concretely, this calls for:

- literacy levels are taken into account when establishing communication channels
- communication tools are safe to access for different groups (including the marginalised people in the community)
- confidentiality of communication is guaranteed as appropriate (e.g. suggestion boxes are only opened by agency staff; in urban contexts where distances between agencies offices and programme sites are generally shorter, there are drop-in hours established for community members to talk in person and privately with agency staff)
- in contexts where women and other marginalised or vulnerable groups are not allowed to have access to mobile communication, for instance, or to sit in on community and village meetings, there are dedicated in-person channels at their disposal to voice their requests, unsolicited comments, concerns and feedback. This often calls for female staff in agencies' monitoring teams to be tasked with reaching out to these groups and individuals separately from other more powerful individuals and gatekeepers in the community.

6. Even if the FM is not specifically designed for the purpose of addressing SEA grievances, consideration should be given to how SEA allegations, or allegations of other serious abuses, misconduct and violations of the law brought to the attention of FM staff will be referred and / or addressed.

It is thus important to consider what would be the procedure in such cases. A useful starting point would be to make sure that agency staff working on a protection, SEA and gender mainstreaming portfolio are, at minimum, made aware of how the FM works, and perhaps ask for advice on communication, follow-up and referral procedures in case more sensitive feedback content is brought to agencies' attention. Another source of advice and support for referral and follow-up of SEA allegations may also come from the Protection Cluster staff.

A related consideration is to think about how to ensure a minimum level of confidentiality and options for anonymity in cases where feedback touches on sensitive issues. A concrete measure could be to work with FM teams, monitoring and MEAL teams to establish a process for receiving and documenting confidential feedback and, if possible, to make sure that follow-up visits (e.g. for verification purposes) are also conducted with discretion and preserve anonymity of the complainant as needed. Where information is provided anonymously, other forms of verification will need to be considered. Responding to anonymous entries and closing the feedback loops is often impossible to do in an individualised manner but, where appropriate, communal meetings or announcement boards can be used to respond to questions and criticisms that have been submitted anonymously.

7. It is important to consider how staffing choices, especially in the teams working on monitoring activities (in the agencies, or implementing partners), can affect the ability to collect feedback and respond to the affected communities.

Concretely, this may call for:

- considering how mixed teams of male / female and national and international staff can facilitate collecting feedback and relaying information and feedback response back to programme participants, relevant gatekeepers and other local actors.
- ensuring that the capacities and skills of agencies' and implementing partners' staff match the requirements of different communication tools and channels. For instance, call centre management staff may require:
  - on-the-job training in interviewing skills and group discussion facilitation, communication and dispute resolution skills
  - shadowing by more experienced staff on how to lead focus group discussions
  - interviewing and listening skills practised with the support and shadowing of more experienced monitoring staff
  - data entry and data analysis skills may call for dedicated training (e.g. in SPSS and MS Access packages)
  - reporting skills that could be supported by teaming up international and national staff, junior and more senior staff when compiling feedback summaries and other reports customised for different internal and external audiences).

The following set of five guidance points cover the FM features that support the process of sorting verification, analysis, reporting and sharing of feedback with relevant decision-makers and users.

8. It is important to consider how feedback data will be entered and sorted in a database or other collection and retrieval system to then be passed on for verification.

Some useful pointers extracted from our evidence call practitioners' attention to the following issues:

Start by disaggregating the raw data according to the nature of feedback and complaints received. This calls for sorting sensitive issues requiring immediate attention (such as SEA allegations, allegations of corruption, staff or local partner misconduct, fraud and other abuses) from feedback that may be less urgent (such as feedback and comments on the quality of assistance provided, suggestions, requests for changes based on preference in the type of assistance and services provided etc.).

This work can be done using tools such as Excel spreadsheets, MS Access or SPSS databases to assign IDs, call-in numbers or codes to different groupings and types of issues raised (e.g. quality of project inputs, or challenges with use of assistance items provided, feedback on coverage and targeting, or requests of additional or different type of assistance).

Ensure that feedback that is recorded in more discursive and often less concise formats (e.g. feedback recorded during focus group discussions, or as part of open-ended questions asked at the conclusion of HH surveys) is not overlooked or overshadowed by feedback collected in more concise numeric forms (e.g. through surveys and monitoring logs), which can be easier to sort through and enter into databases.

9. It is important to consider how feedback data will be checked and verified in order to design a feedback mechanism that provides reliable information for programme staff to act on and base decisions on.

Concretely, some of the actions that support feedback verification are:

- making sure that data collected is triangulated across different sources. For instance, feedback collected through surveys, suggestion box sheets, or logbook entries is considered in conjunction with feedback collected during community meetings and open-ended questions during HH monitoring visits. This requires strong data synthesis skills
- making sure that even issues that are raised only sporadically – but repeatedly over time – are recorded and verified and looked into as appropriate as they may also be useful for trend analysis
- being clear in the design of the FM whose job it is to verify feedback and what the procedure / verification window is (for instance, this may be 48 hours for sensitive complaints and SEA allegations)
- considering the use of inter-agency cluster mechanisms (if present) to verify issues raised. This may mean establishing some level of information-sharing and reporting from field-based cluster focal points and cluster coordinators to the capital-level inter-cluster coordination group or even Humanitarian Coordination Team (HCT) as appropriate
- considering how other sources of data can be used to better understand the feedback received, and the patterns of behaviour, preferences, choices and use of assistance received (e.g. using market surveys). Concretely, verification and validation will also often occur through comparison of feedback with other information sources, with qualitative and quantitative data often coming from assessment and monitoring. (See also guidance point 13)
- allocating time and resources to follow up or investigate feedback, particularly sensitive issues, SEA allegations, misconduct and other abuses which require more confidential follow-up. Concretely, this may call for repeated monitoring and follow-up visits by community liaison officers, community agents and MEAL staff who can spend more time in communities to facilitate group, HH and individual interactions to better understand the nature and potential implications of the issues raised.

After being sorted and verified, the next step in the feedback handling process paying attention to the different potential users. Some users will need to receive the information for more immediate acknowledgement and response. This is the case for field monitoring / M&E / MEAL teams (in both agencies and implementing partners) who would inform programme participants and communities that issues have been taken up and passed on to colleagues in the agency office for further follow-up. Whenever possible, they would also try to address or respond to issues on the spot (this may 'simply' entail providing clarification about the programme or selection criteria etc.).

Other users, such as team leaders and project managers, would also require detailed and verified information to decide on the appropriate course of action. This can mean asking for more information to be collected to better understand the magnitude, recurrence and implications of the issues raised (e.g. there could also be allegations of mismanagement or feedback on the relevance of certain assistance items and services provided).

The appropriate course of action can entail including feedback in periodic reporting shared with senior managers to alert them about issues arising from affected populations and communities (e.g. changes in their status, their preferences, their use of assistance and services).

10. It is important to pay attention to both solicited and unsolicited feedback – including feedback gathered in more open-ended, discursive formats.

An important consideration that applies to both verification and analysis of feedback data is ensuring that feedback captured through in-person visits, community meetings, focus group discussions, or answers to open-ended assessment, monitoring and HH survey forms gets recorded and agency staff are able to analyse it even if it is presented in a discursive format. Unsolicited feedback can be difficult to record because:

- comments and concerns received in discursive forms often risk being lost because they are more difficult and time-consuming to record, summarise, verify and triangulate, and because it may be necessary to 'reformat' the data to fit the FM data entry format
- even when staff are able to produce detailed transcripts from focus group discussions or other feedback sessions, M&E or the dedicated FM team require strong qualitative data analysis skills and synthesis skills for working with feedback that is largely qualitative
- it can be 'dispersed' across groups and individuals, making it difficult to aggregate it across programme location and time for verification, follow-up and analysis
- it may touch on issues that go beyond the remit and scope of work of a programme, or of an organisation, or may touch on programme coverage and relevance which an organisation may feel ill-equipped to address and follow up. At the same time, unsolicited feedback can be an important source of information about the perceptions of the affected population. Agencies are taking different approaches on how to deal with these dual data sets. Some agencies have been setting up feedback mechanisms that only handle what falls within the remit of their work and their programmes. For instance, they would often use feedback collection tools that rely on a specific set of questions covering only their areas of interventions and assistance. Others are working with the aspiration of listening broadly to both solicited and unsolicited

feedback on issues that may go beyond their specific area of work, or even expertise. In this case, they would then try to use that feedback to support their advocacy efforts with local partners, local authorities and donors.

In addition to paying attention to both solicited and unsolicited feedback, it is important to distinguish between different feedback caseloads that may be brought to agencies' attention.

> Type I feedback is day-to-day feedback about ongoing activities and programmes.

Type I feedback: this is feedback about day-to-day activities, often concerning the quality, type of assistance and users' preferences about the assistance provided. This type of feedback can be relatively easy to act on. It often calls for project- / programme-level adjustments, mid-course modification or 'tweaking' of existing assistance modalities (e.g. adjustment in targeting criteria, scheduling of distributions, or type of design options available for a shelter programme, etc.). This has been the main focus of this research (and hence also of the present guidance), as this is the area in which it was evident that ALNAP Members have accrued more experience and have dedicated more reflection and learning.

> Type II feedback speaks to 'big-picture' and strategic issues.

Type II feedback: this type of feedback speaks to 'big-picture issues', often strategic issues at the broader level of the humanitarian response and strategies taken to support people's and national government's relief, recovery and reconstruction efforts. This is feedback that may challenge the very premise of a programme or its relevance and context appropriateness. It is often about intended and unintended impacts of the programme (i.e. 'your assistance is undermining local capacity', 'assistance is causing tensions in the community' (aka 'doing harm'), 'we need livelihoods not handouts', etc.). Operational agencies receiving such feedback through their formal or informal channels often struggle with its handling this type of feedback and there is often no concrete process for documenting, referring, analysing and responding to such feedback through established coordination mechanisms, cluster-level mechanisms, or policy and strategy-level discussions between the Humanitarian Country Team and the host government.

It is important to be alert to this distinction because both types of feedback should be recorded, but there is a risk of overlooking the type II feedback, because it often touches on issues beyond the scope of work or remit of a single agency, or of a single cluster. Type II feedback could be recorded and analysed separately and shared at inter-agency level, or shared with local partners and other actors who may already be working to address some of the issues raised. It can also be used to inform advocacy and public communication efforts by aid agencies at the national and global level.

Lack of analysis on or capacity to address type II feedback is a point that for many indicates a broader critique of the aid response system in general, and its often low responsiveness to the perceptions of the affected populations[33]. Documentation and evidence of the procedures agencies have in place to follow up and respond to type II feedback which touches on broader, strategic issues, beyond day-to-day

33 See, for instance, Anderson, Brown, Jean (2012).

34 For an overview of IASC work on AAP (and SEA), as well as for a selection of key documents outlining how the AAP have been discussed with reference to field-level piloting and learning, refer to the main IASC AAP portal at: http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/pageloader.aspx?page=content-subsidi-common-default&sb=89.

implementation of programmes, remains very limited. This is an area that calls for more research and analysis.

Recent work spearheaded by the IASC through the Transformative Agenda and related Accountability to Affected Population (AAP) Commitments is seen as a notable step in that direction.[34] Work conducted to develop the present guidance could only take a cursory look at this area of agencies' practice. The research team only came across a few examples where agencies mentioned their efforts to capture feedback on type II issues – even if the issues were related to broader issues beyond their agencies' remit and scope of work (see Pakistan case study, Box 1, on 'Feedback use – advocating on land issues at the cluster and national level'). In some cases agencies proceeded to record those issues to use them to support their advocacy efforts – including at inter-agency and HCT levels – to more forcefully bring the issues to the attention of donors and decision-makers.

The following guidance points cover the actions to be taken at the design phase to ensure that participants' feedback is responded to and used.

11. Closely related to the previous points on verification and analysis of feedback is the call for making participants' feedback usable and actionable for decision-making and response purposes.

There are two basic points that should be considered here:

- The level of detail of feedback analysis (and subsequent reporting) needs to be customised to different users. There is generally a trade-off between the level of detail required and the level of involvement of a programme manager, head of programme, head of operation or other decision-makers in the day-to-day management of the programme, or delivery of the service from which feedback was collected. Senior decision-makers do not need to hear minute details of feedback entries. They want to see a concise summary of issues they need to act on.
- For feedback to be a source of compelling evidence that informs decisions, it needs to be recognised and used as part of a broader evidence bundle used by programme managers and decision-makers. Concretely, this means that taking actions based on affected populations' feedback depends on whether and how this type of information enters and is featured in other sets of qualitative and quantitative data (or evidence bundles) coming from various sources (e.g. monitoring, assessment), channels (e.g. implementing partners, local authorities) and reporting lines (MEAL teams, communication teams etc.). Such data sets are then used for different purposes including monitoring, assessment, communication, advocacy, coordination and decision-making etc. The more far-reaching the expected change is (for instance, a shift in programming from food handouts to cash-based intervention, or a change in focus from provision of transitional shelter to a rent and relocation programme), the greater the need is to validate affected populations' feedback and make sure it is featured in relevant reports and data sets looked at by more senior decision-makers and even donors.

34 For an overview of IASC work on AAP (and SEA), as well as for a selection of key documents outlining how the AAP have been discussed with reference to field-level piloting and learning, refer to the main IASC AAP portal at: http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/pageloader.aspx?page=content-subsidi-common-default&sb=89.

Below are some examples of how affected populations' feedback was looked at as part of an evidence bundle to inform decision-making:

- Affected populations' feedback summaries are prepared and circulated prior to coordination and other operational meetings in which programme managers and heads of operations look at different data coming from assessment, cluster reports, reports on access and security etc. (Pointer from IOM and Shelter Cluster Pakistan).
- Affected populations' feedback which has been documented, tracked over time, and analysed for trending purposes can be a powerful addition to other streams of more quantitative information and evidence generated from assessment and monitoring data. It can be used to strengthen the strategic choices to change the course of an operation, adjust a programme focus, change type of assistance provided or advocate for a change in donors' funding allocation. (Pointer IFRC Haiti, WV Sudan, IOM Pakistan).
- Summaries or mini case studies in local languages presenting the feedback, which actions have been taken and which responses given can be used as powerful tools to communicate with affected communities, partners, and donors about programme quality, transparency and accountability. (Pointer from British Red Cross, Haiti, and CRS Haiti).

12. Organisations should ensure that feedback data is requested by those in a position to do something with it (e.g. respond or act upon it), and regularly passed on by those who collect it.

For example:

- programme managers and senior managers should request feedback summaries to be prepared for them (e.g. ahead of operational meetings, and ahead of meeting with donor representatives). If managers do not ask for this information, FM staff should consider providing it anyway (in an appropriate concise and usable format) as an additional source of information, until this practice becomes more engrained. (Pointer from IOM Shelter Cluster Pakistan, British Red Cross, and IFRC in Haiti)

Organisations should provide incentives for managers to use feedback and for FM staff, programme staff, monitoring, communication and MEAL staff to analyse and report feedback and pass it on. Incentives may include peer pressure; managerial pressure; requirements to comply with internal commitments and expectations on communication, participation, accountability, and transparency (some agencies, for instance, have included these rubrics in their staff performance review forms). Positive role modelling should be encouraged y senior staff and managers who are seen as concretely using feedback collected to change some programme features, or to correct the course of programmes, activities and operations. (Pointers from SCF Pakistan, IOM Pakistan, WV Sudan)

The following guidance point is about ensuring that aid recipients have clear perceptions and expectations about what the feedback mechanism can and cannot do.

13. Avoid conflicting messages on purpose, expectation of use and support allocated to FM work

It is important to communicate the purpose and expected use(s) of the FM in a clear and consistent way, both internally with agency staff, and externally with aid recipients, local actors and implementing partners. This will help to achieve greater clarity on and alignment of the expectations and perceptions of the value and practical use of FMs. Some of the actions that will help you achieve this internally, within your agency, are:

- including an introduction to FM work and how feedback can be used by different staff and teams in different roles (from monitoring, to advocacy, to communication) as part of staff induction and orientation sessions (Pointer drawn from CRS Haiti)
- communicating to agency staff about how a highly functional feedback mechanism is also one of the components (e.g. together with information-sharing, transparency, participation etc.) of an accountability framework for the whole organisation (Pointer from CRS Haiti, SCF Pakistan) and useful for programme quality improvement (see comment above)
- making sure that points on FM functioning, FM support and the ways feedback data can be used are included in exit interviews and debriefing before staff rotate or leave their positions (Pointer from WV Sudan and CRS Haiti)
- minimising the mismatch between the commitment to programme quality, Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) and transparency, as presented in an agency's statement and public documents, and the actual level of resources allocated to supporting the work to sustain it, including functioning feedback and complaints systems. (Pointer from SCF Pakistan and CRS Haiti)

Some of the actions that will help you achieve this externally, when engaging with aid recipients, are:

- making sure that you communicate objectives, scope and expectations of the programme itself. This is critical: programme participants need to be clear about what the agency is trying to achieve before they can provide informed and useful feedback on it. This is also a core AAP principle spelled out in the HAP Standard
- taking opportunities to present (and periodically repeat and refresh) the messages around the purpose and concrete functioning of the feedback mechanism including how to access feedback and other communication channels, how confidentiality is guaranteed as appropriate and how responses to feedback are communicated. This can be done by taking advantage of communities and village-level gatherings, such as meetings for selection from among affected populations, and registration activities or assistance items (food and non-food items distribution) (Pointer from WV Sudan, IOM Pakistan, IFRC Haiti)
- making sure that women – or marginalised and other vulnerable groups and individuals who in certain contexts may not be in a position to participate in community-level activities, meetings, or aid registration and distribution – are also targeted by dedicated communication and monitoring activities (e.g. as part of field assessment and monitoring visits) They should also have the chance to hear and ask questions about, access to feedback channels and what they can expect from the mechanism. (Pointer from IOM Pakistan and IFRC Haiti).

The following four guidance points are about individual and organisational support (in terms of staffing support and resources) that helps sustain FM work over time. They also present considerations for improvement of the feedback handling process through formal and informal learning opportunities.

14. Sustain FM work across the organisation – from field-based and national staff, to more senior programme managers.

In order to ensure that feedback collection, response and use do not become sporadic exercises, but are sustained over time and become part of how an organisation carries out its activities, FM functions need to be supported by staff at different levels, grades and roles in the organisation. Below are a few suggestions that can help achieve this:

- Ensure that the skills and competencies required for data collection, data sorting, verification and analysis are adequate to the tasks to be completed (e.g. computer literacy, Excel, SPSS, MS Access database management as skills included in training and on-the-job skills development opportunities). If possible, establish on-the-job induction and coaching from more senior staff (Pointer from WV Sudan)
- Identify peer learning opportunities and resource sharing opportunities within your own broader organisation (for example, for WV Sudan this would mean connecting with the broader WV Food Programming Management Group and World Vision International; for IOM and the Shelter Cluster in Pakistan it meant connecting with other Shelter Cluster members in Pakistan and cluster lead teams in other countries where IOM plays a cluster lead role) (Pointer from WV Sudan, IOM Pakistan, IFRC Haiti)
- Ensure that staff in charge of synthesising, summarising and reporting on feedback possess the skills and competencies required to perform their functions effectively. One suggestion is to institute internal staff rotation to expose team members to different tasks related to feedback handling and reporting. This is also helpful to avoid over-specialisation and working in 'silos'. For instance, data entry specialists may rotate to accompany field monitors in their work to collect feedback during in-person interviews, or may periodically rotate in functions where they can be 'mentored' during the report drafting stage for feedback summaries. (Pointers from WV Sudan, IOM Pakistan and IFRC Haiti)

15. The role of organisational culture in sustaining FM work should not be overlooked

Individuals and teams need to perceive the agencies' culture and environment they work in as a place where: a) giving and receiving feedback is valued by staff at different levels of seniority and across functions; and b) giving and receiving feedback is practised as part of communication approaches and staff performance management systems (e.g. part of 360-degree performance feedback discussions). Some concrete steps that can be taken to support this are:

For programme manager and senior manager teams, implementing an open-door policy by being approachable by their staff (and implementing partners,where appropriate) (Pointer from IOM Pakistan and CRS Haiti); and making sure to provide colleagues with feedback on their performance.

16. Harness opportunities to gather evidence and learn about how well FM is working and what can be done to improve it

It is important that opportunities for learning about how feedback collection, handling and use is harnessed as part of both formal and informal assessment, learning, evaluation and reviews. Some concrete options include:

- Whenever possible, harness the opportunities for collaboration and joint work with partners, such as including cluster partners (e.g. using common feedback collection channels, or communication channels with other partners, or conducting joint assessment and monitoring visits). (Pointer from IOM Pakistan, IFRC and Haitian Red Cross in Haiti).
- Both programme managers and field-based teams should consider the use of internal email lists and mailing groups across teams, functions and staff seniority to make sure that there is a channel for questions on how to address feedback, respond to queries, and pass on complaints, such as those received during monitoring visits. (Pointer from IOM Pakistan)
- Both programme managers and field-based teams should consider the use of internal email lists and mailing groups across teams, functions and staff seniority to ensure that staff in more junior positions, and / or in field-based positions, can see how the whole of the organisation, including more senior managers, takes a direct interest in hearing about and trying to respond to feedback, questions and complaints. (Pointer from IOM Pakistan / Shelter Cluster Pakistan)
- Whenever possible, include FM work and use of feedback from affected populations as one of the Terms of Reference (ToR) elements in evaluation of programmes and operations. This can help to generate some evidence on what the FM is contributing to programme improvement, ownership, transparency and improved two-way communication, for instance. Given that the quality of data and analysis that feeds into evaluation products varies greatly, one suggestion is to try to ensure that FM data is not only analysed according to the demographic of the population and users who access feedback channels. Ideally, evaluation look at the outcomes to which feedback response can contribute. (Pointer from IFRC Haiti and WV Sudan)

6

Concluding remarks

Through the research and analysis conducted, the cases that the research team had the opportunity to observe and document in Sudan, Pakistan and Haiti provided:

- many strong examples of well-functioning portions of feedback mechanisms for affected populations (e.g. two-way communication in Haiti, information- and feedback-information-sharing across Shelter Cluster staff and partners in Pakistan)
- a growing set of examples of feedback mechanism designs and plans currently being finalised by several agencies, so as to formally establish and use these mechanisms as part of their programmes. This is the case for the American Red Cross and Spanish Red Cross in Haiti and WFP in Sudan. As part of this process, many have for the first time allocated human and financial resources to support FM work
- examples of a considerable number of agencies who have more recently experienced feedback mechanisms and who show a desire to learn how to improve their feedback practices from peer agencies with longer experience in this area of work (e.g. IFRC PAWG work in Haiti).

Considering the original hypotheses, the data analysis suggests that the initial seven propositions tested are not equal contributors to the effectiveness of a feedback mechanism. Bearing in mind that by design and in practice the propositions overlapped, it seems that an effective feedback mechanism can be established without the presence of all the seven propositions, because one proposition may compensate for another. It also appears that if one area (for instance, staff skills and organisational support) is particularly strong, then others (such as periodic reassessment and review of the mechanism) may not be required.

At the same time, most of the FM features of interest seem to be ‘necessary but not sufficient’ to ensure the overall high functionality of a feedback mechanism. It could be argued that this is because several of these mechanisms (e.g. on cultural / context appropriateness, expectation-setting and knowledge, and organisational support) are complementary and provide ‘continuous’ support to the FM, while other FM features (e.g. those related to feedback collection, verification and analysis of feedback data) provide more discrete support to the mechanism during the feedback handling cycle. While most FM features studied appear to contribute to more effective mechanisms, no single factor is enough to guarantee success.

Those designing feedback mechanisms should attempt to ensure that a majority of these factors are in place. Nevertheless, some features and characteristics of feedback mechanisms seem to contribute more decisively to their overall functioning. From the analysis conducted, these key factors include:

- agencies’ and FM staff’s ability to process, analyse, synthesise and report on feedback data

- clear and consistent communication and messaging on the purpose and usefulness of the mechanism for both affected populations and agency staff in different roles and positions
- whether the design and 'institutional' location of the feedback mechanism within a programme, or agency's organogram, creates a 'path' for feedback information to be shared within the agency and looked at by different users together with data from other monitoring sources to support decision-making on activities, programmes, operations, etc.
- whether implementing partners and other local actors are aware of the feedback mechanism's purposes and functions and are supported in their role of collecting feedback and relaying responses to affected communities.

Finally, it should be stressed that this study attempted to show that it is possible to make feedback mechanisms work for both affected populations and aid agencies. It aimed to document concrete examples of what agencies in different contexts have done to strengthen some of the communication and programme design features that they saw as crucial to improving feedback practices with the communities they work with.

The study also sheds light on how nuanced and articulated affected populations' views and perceptions of feedback mechanisms are; whether and how they think they are useful for them; and why they think such systems are established by the aid agencies in the first place. The most frequently mentioned purposes include monitoring and verification, identifying eligible programme participants, and troubleshooting day-to-day activities or aid distribution. Strikingly, in many of the contexts visited, affected communities showed a keen interest in experimenting with more channels and more diverse ways to contact and communicate with agencies, and receive responses from them. This indicates not only the strong complementarity between communication and feedback support work, but also that investments in these areas are generally welcomed by the affected populations.

This study should not be seen as revolving around and attempting to dissect only the more mechanistic features of feedback systems. Projectisation and over-specialisation of tasks and functions relating to feedback are by no means suggested as the ideal (or the only) way forward.

Indeed, this study shows that when it comes to make feedback mechanisms work, there are a number of functions – including communication, information-sharing, monitoring, reporting, community engagement and coordination with local actors – that are already carried out by agency staff and their partners on the ground. The study shows that many of these functions are also integral components of FM work. Therefore, one of the overarching messages coming from this research is that it is possible to start making feedback practices work better by making them more intentional, and supporting the feedback handling work that is already carried out by agencies and their partners – even if they are not operating under the formal label of 'feedback mechanisms'.

Finally, the research team concludes by highlighting some areas that emerged during this research as calling for more research and closer examination in the future. Two topics stand out: the first involves zooming in on internal decision-making processes that make response and follow-up possible for both type I and type II feedback. The second concerns looking at feasibility, options and at existing (arguably still limited) practices in inter-agency feedback and complaints mechanisms.

Bibliography

Abu-Sada, C. (2012) *In the eyes of others: how people in crises perceive humanitarian aid.* Geneva and New York: MSF, Humanitarian Outcomes, NYU Center on International Cooperation. (www.alnap.org/resource/8743)

Adinolfi, C., Bassiouni, D., Lauritzsen, H. and Williams, H. (2005) Humanitarian response review, an independent report commissioned by the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Geneva and New York: OCHA. (www.alnap.org/resource/3284)

ALNAP and Groupe URD (2009) Participation handbook for humanitarian field workers: Involving crisis-affected people in a humanitarian response. Plaisians: Groupe URD. (www.alnap.org/resource/8531.aspx)

Anderson, M., Brown, D. and Jean, I. (2012) Time to listen: Hearing people on the receiving end of international aid. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects. (www.cdainc.com/cdawww/pdf/book/time_to_listen_pdf_Pdf1.pdf)

Bainbridge, D. (2011) 'Community feedback and complaints mechanisms: early lessons from Tearfund's experience', in Mitchell, J. and Knox-Clarke, P. (eds), Humanitarian accountability [special feature] Humanitarian Exchange 52. London: HPN/ODI. pp. 31–33. (www.alnap.org/resource/6256)

Baños Smith, H. (2009) 'The right to a say and the duty to respond: the impact of complaints and response mechanisms on humanitarian action'. HAP Commissioned Studies Series. (www.alnap.org/resource/5856)

Bonino, F. and Knox Clarke, P. (2013) 'Effective humanitarian feedback mechanisms: Methodology summary for a joint ALNAP and CDA action research'. Working Draft. London: ALNAP/ODI (www.alnap.org/resource/8005)

Chandran, R. and Thow, A. (eds) (2013) *Humanitarianism in the Network Age, OCHA Policy and Studies Series.* OCHA: Geneva. (www.unocha.org/hina)

Chapelier, C. and Shah, A. (2013) 'Improving communication between humanitarian aid agencies and crisis-affected people: lessons from the Infosaid project', Network Paper 74. HPN/ODI: London. (www.alnap.org/resource/8756)

Chazaly, C. (2011) *Beneficiary Communications Evaluation: Haiti Earthquake Operation 2011.* Geneva: IFRC. (www.alnap.org/resource/6157)

Darcy, J. and Knox Clarke, P. (2012) Evidence and Knowledge in Humanitarian Action. ALNAP Annual Meeting Background Paper. London: ALNAP/ODI.

Darcy, J., Alexander, J. and Kiani, M. (2013) 2013 Humanitarian Accountability Report. Geneva: HAP (www.alnap.org/resource/8758)

Davies, A. (2007) 'Concerning Accountability of Humanitarian Action', Humanitarian Practice Network Network Paper 58. London: ODI-HPG.

DRC – Danish Refugee Council (2008) Complaints Mechanism Handbook. (drc.dk/fileadmin/uploads/pdf/IA_PDF/HAP/complaints_mechanism_handbook_2008.pdf)

Gerring, John (2012) Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework. 2nd ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Gostelow, L. et al. (2010) SCHR peer review on accountability to disaster-affected populations: an overview of lessons learned. Geneva: Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response. (www.alnap.org/resource/5797)

Hagen-Zanker, J. and Mallett, R. (2013) 'How to do a rigorous, evidence-focused literature review in international development: A Guidance Note'. Working Paper. (www.odi.org.uk/publications/7834-rigorous-evidence-focused-literature-review-international-development-guidance-note)

Holstein, J. and Gubrium, J. (1995) *The Active Interview.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

HPN (2003) 'Humanitarian Accountability', Humanitarian Exchange 24. London: HPN/ODI. (www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-24)

IASC AAP/PSEA Task Team (2013) 'Accountability to Affected Populations & Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Task Team Work Plan: January 2014–December 2015' (draft) Geneva and New York: IASC.

IASC PSEA Task Force (2012a) 'Minimum Operating Standards: Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse'. Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Task Force. Geneva and New York: IASC.

IASC PSEA Task Force (2012b) 'Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: Compendium of Practices on Community-Based Complaints Mechanisms' Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Task Force. Geneva and New York: IASC.

IASC PSEA Task Force (2013) 'Guidelines to Implement the Minimum Operating Standards for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by UN and non-UN Personnel'. Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Task Force. Geneva and New York: IASC.

ICVA (2011) 'Building Safer Organisations Guidelines: Receiving and Investigating Allegations of Abuse and Exploitation by Humanitarian Workers'. Geneva: ICVA.

IFRC (2011b) *Project / programme monitoring and evaluation (M&E): guide.* Geneva: IFRC. (www.alnap.org/resource/8542.aspx)

InterAction (2010) 'Step by Step Guide to Addressing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse'. Washington DC: InterAction.

Jean, I. with Bonino, F. (2013) 'We are committed to listen to you': World Vision's experience with humanitarian feedback mechanisms in Darfur. ALNAP¬–CDA Case Study. London: ALNAP/ODI. (www.alnap.org/resource/8851)

Keystone Accountability (2013) Constituent Voice, Technical note 1. (http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/resources/guides)

Keystone Accountability (n.d.) Glossary. (http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/glossary)

Levaditis, A. (2007) 'World Vision Lanka tsunami response: Humanitarian Accountability Team lessons learned - perspectives from communities and staff'. (www.alnap.org/resource/8838)

Mahmood, H. and Barech, Q. (2012) 'Setting up & implementation of complaints / feedback handling – A case study from Jamam Camp'. South Sudan Response Programme. (www.ingoaccountabilitycharter.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/Case-Study_Complaint-Feedback-Handling-Jamam_June-2012.pdf)

Mandel, J. and Sommerfeldt, E. (2012) *Closing the loop – Responding to people's information needs from crisis response to recovery to development: A case study of post-earthquake Haiti.* London: Internews. (www.alnap.org/resource/6371)

Mitchell, J. and Knox Clarke, P. (eds) (2011) Humanitarian accountability [special feature], Humanitarian Exchange 52. London: HPN/ODI. (www.alnap.org/resource/6256)

Monti, C. (2013) *Haiti: Beneficiary Communications Review***.** Geneva: IFRC. (www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/121469/1253602-Beneficiary-Communications-Evaluation-Report-A4-EN-03.pdf)

Morrow, N., Mock, N., Papendieck, A. and Kocmich, N. (2011) *Independent Evaluation of Ushahidi Haiti Project.* Development Information Systems International. (www.alnap.org/resource/6000)

Munyas Ghadially, B. (2013) *Programme Accountability Guidance Pack – A Save the Children Resource.* London: Save the Children.

Nelson, A., Sigal, I. and Zambrano, D. (2011) *Media, Information Systems and Communities: Lessons from Haiti.* London: CDAC, Internews. (www.alnap.org/resource/6268)

Norman, B. (2012) Monitoring and accountability practices for remotely managed projects implemented in volatile operating environments: a research study detailing the key issues and responding good practices. London: Tearfund and

HIF. (www.humanitarianinnovation.org/sites/default/files/remote_monitoring_and_accountability_practices_-_tf_2012.pdf)

Nyathi, L. (2008) 'Data Collection and Reporting', in WV – FPMG, Complaint and Response Mechanisms: Resource Guide, First Edition. Monrovia: CA. 188–213. (www.alnap.org/resource/8770)

Oughton, S. (2011) 'We need to talk: good communications help Haiti recover. BRC Blog, 16 December. London: BRC. (blogs.redcross.org.uk/emergencies/2011/12/we-need-to-talk-good-communications-help-haiti-recover/)

Oxfam International (2011) 'Complaints and feedback handling procedure for Oxfam Affiliates in Haiti'. MEAL Officer Report. Haiti: Oxfam Intermon.

Ramalingam, B. and Mitchell, J. with Borton, J. and Smart, K. (2009) 'Counting what counts: performance and effectiveness in the humanitarian sector', in ALNAP's 8th Review of Humanitarian Action. London: ALNAP/ODI. (www.alnap.org/resource/5666)

Raza, M. and Khan, I. (2011) 'Research on observance of quality and accountability principles in humanitarian sector in Pakistan'. Pakistan: CWS-P/A. (www.cwspa.org/download-document/79-research-on-observance-of-quality-and-accountability-principles-in-humanitarian-sector-in-pakistan)

Sameera A., Hassan, M. and Akram, S. (2010) Monitoring and Accountability Manual: Emergency Response and Recovery Program. Pakistan: Save the Children Monitoring, Evaluation and Recovery Program Unit. (www.alnap.org/pool/files/1358.pdf)

Save the Children (2011) Guide to setting-up Child-friendly Complaints and Response Mechanisms: Lessons learnt from Save the Children's CRM in Dadaab Refugee Camp.

Scriven, K. (2013) HIF Innovation Case Study SMS Feedback and Accountability in Somalia. London: ALNAP and HIF.

Silverman, D. (2010) Doing Qualitative Research – A Practical Handbook. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Spencer, L. Jane Ritchie, Jane Lewis and Lucy Dillon (2003) 'Quality in Qualitative Evaluation: A framework for assessing research evidence'. London: Government Chief Social Researcher's Office. (www.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/a_quality_framework_tcm6-38740.pdf)

Srodecki, J. (2008) 'Why do Accountability? A business case from Sri Lanka', h-account Humanitarian Accountability. Sri Lanka: World Vision HEA. (www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/wv-business-case-for-a-humanitarian-accountability-function-may-08-edit.pdf)

Thet, K. K., Khin, E. E., and Khing, E. T. (2010) 'Accountability matters in emergencies: listening to children and responding to their feedback during Save the Children's humanitarian response in Myanmar (Burma)'. London: Save the Children UK. (resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/library/accountability-matters-emergencies-listening-children-and-responding-their-feedback-during)

Wall, I. with Chéry, Y. G. (2011) *Ann Kite Yo Pale or Let Them Speak: Best practice and lessons learned in communications with disaster affected communities communication – Haiti 2010*. London: BBC World Service Trust, UK Aid, Internews Europe. (www.alnap.org/resource/6188)

Wood, A. (2011a) Overview of NGO-community complaints mechanisms. Global Accountability Discussion Series 2. Geneva: World Vision. (www.alnap.org/resources/8768)

Wood, A. (2011b) The community context and complaints handling by NGOs. Global Accountability Discussion Series 1. Geneva: World Vision. (www.alnap.org/resources/8769)

World Vision (2009) Complaint and response mechanisms: resource guide. Monrovia, CA: World Vision FPMG. (www.alnap.org/resource/8770)

World Vision International – FPMG (2009) Complaint and Response Mechanisms: Resource Guide, First Edition. Monrovia: CA. (www.alnap.org/resource/8770)

Yin, R. K. (2009) Case study research: design and methods. 4th ed. Applied Social Research Methods Series. Volume 5. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Abbreviations and acronyms

AAP Accountability to Affected Populations

BCT Beneficiary Communication Team, IFRC Haiti

CDAC Communicating with Disaster-Affected Communities

CHD Community Help Desk (World Vision Sudan)

FGD Focus group discussion

FM Feedback mechanism

GBV Gender-based violence

HCC Humanitarian Call Centre (IOM and Shelter Cluster Pakistan)

HCT Humanitarian Country Team

HH Household

IASC AAP/PSEA TT Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Team on Accountability to Affected Populations and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

IASC Inter-Agency Standing Committee

IFRC International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

INA Integrated Neighbourhood Approach

IOM International Organization for Migration

IVR Interactive Voice Response

M&E Monitoring and Evaluation

MEAL Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning

OCHA United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

ORS One-Room Shelter programme (IOM, Pakistan)

PNS Participating National Society (National Society from the RCRC movement participating in the aid response in a third country)

PSEA Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

RCRC Red Cross Red Crescent Movement

SEA Sexual exploitation and abuse

SPSS Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (software package for statistical analysis)

ToR Terms of Reference

WFP World Food Programme

WV FDFP Food Distribution Focal Point system (World Vision Sudan)

WV World Vision

WV-FPMG WV Food Programming and Management Group

WVI World Vision International

Annexes

Annex 1: Example of feedback 'markers' used

Feature of interest	Related FM effectiveness proposition to test	Example of markers used (as reflected in the interview protocol used)
Expectations on desirability and usefulness of the feedback mechanism and knowledge that users have about it	A humanitarian feedback mechanism – and one that falls within the scope of this study – is more effective if: • those receiving aid / affected populations are clear about what they can legitimately expect from the feedback mechanism and the organisation running it; and • if those receiving aid / affected communities are aware of and understand how to use the feedback mechanism (and are made aware of changes affecting them).	Questions were asked of the different FM stakeholders about: whether the scope and purpose of the FM have been presented to them (yes / no) – if yes, how? whether they were consulted before different feedback communication channels had been established (yes / no) – if yes, how? whether and how the scope and purpose of work of the feedback mechanism have been presented externally to other agencies (e.g. working in the same area, or with the same population) and to the implementing partners (if applicable) and other relevant local authorities whether agency staff as well as affected populations can articulate and explain what they think can be concretely achieved through using the mechanism.

Annex 2: Example of the development of the interview protocol by FM stakeholder group

In the matrix below, the first column lists the desirable/higher-level features of feedback mechanisms; the first row lists the seven stakeholders that were identified as representing the different actors that establish, access and use the feedback mechanisms, or the data generated by such systems. The matrix below gives some examples of how interview questions have been formulated for different stakeholders.

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">Desirable/ high-level features</th><th colspan="7">Feedback mechanism stakeholders</th></tr>
<tr><th>Designer / owner</th><th>Senior decision-maker</th><th>Supervisor</th><th>Partner / daily implementer</th><th>Gatekeeper</th><th>Those receiving aid</th><th>Those not receiving aid</th></tr>
<tr><td>Proposition 1. Periodic reassessment and adjustment</td><td colspan="3">Have changes been made in the feedback mechanism (targeting, channels and tools activated, expected use, data entry, location, access) and why? How were these decisions made?</td><td colspan="2">Do [agency] staff periodically ask you how the feedback mechanism is working? Have changes been made to feedback collection processes? How were these decisions made? How were you / others consulted / engaged?</td><td colspan="2">Have changes been made to feedback collection processes? How were these decisions made? How were you / others consulted / engaged? Did agency staff come to ask if any changes were needed?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Proposition 3. Expectation-setting and knowledge</td><td colspan="3">What is the purpose of feedback mechanisms for affected populations in [agency]? How is feedback from affected populations useful to you in your role? How were those receiving aid made aware / informed about: i) mandate of the agency; ii) mission / goals of the project (planned activities, timeline, targeting)? Do you feel that what the feedback mechanism does is seen as important / useful / valuable by senior / management staff? Give examples of why or why not.</td><td colspan="2">What is the purpose of the [feedback mechanism]? What is your role? Do you know what happens to all the feedback that you record? How were those receiving aid informed about [feedback mechanism] and how to use it? Do they know how this information is used?</td><td colspan="2">Why do you think [agency] gathers feedback about their assistance to affected populations? Do you know how the feedback information is used?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Proposition 7. Individual and organisational support</td><td colspan="3">Why do you think: i) allowing, ii) encouraging, iii) providing the means for those receiving aid to provide feedback is important?</td><td colspan="2">Do you feel that agency staff see your feedback as important?</td><td colspan="2">Do you feel that agency staff see your feedback as important? How do you know?</td></tr>
</table>

Annex 3: Excerpt from the data synthesis tool used (including rating system)

	prop.1: periodic reassessment and adjustment							prop.3: expectation-setting + knowledge							prop.7: individual + organisational support						
	designer/owner	senior mgmt	supervisor	partner/daily implementer	gatekeeper	those receiving aid	those not receiving aid	designer/owner	senior mgmt	supervisor	partner/daily implementer	gatekeeper	those receiving aid	those not receiving aid	designer/owner	senior mgmt	supervisor	partner/daily implementer	gatekeeper	those receiving aid	those not receiving aid
SUDAN																					
Researcher 1	3	for 2	2 or 3	no data	no data	no data or 1		3	2	3	3	3	2 or 3		2 or 3	2 or 3	2 or 3	2	no data	nil / 1 no data	
consolidated rating	3	2	2	no data	no data	no data		3	2	3	3	3	2		3	2	3	2	no data	no data	
Researcher 2	3	2	2	no data	no data	no data		3	2	3	3	3	2		3	2	3	2	no data	no data	
interviewees /FGD sessions for Sudan case	Names	Names	Names	Names	Names	Names		Names	Names	Names	Names	Names	Names		Names	Names	Names	Names	Names	Names	

ALNAP
Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

T + 44 (0)20 7922 0388
F + 44 (0)20 7922 0399
E alnap@alnap.org

CDA
One Alewife Center
Cambridge
MA 02140
Tel: + 1 617 661 6310
Email: ijean@cdacollaborative.org

Thanks are due to the Federal Republic of Germany, whose generous funding helped make this project possible.