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THIS ISSUE
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FEATURES

10 Civil Society in Post-Soviet Central Asia
By Arlene Lear

13 Shifting Mindsets in Post-Soviet Tajikistan
Fostering change from the grassroots up.
By David Taylor

15 Closing the Loop
Systematic feedback mechanisms in international assistance efforts.
By Isabella Jean

17 Hosting Support
An overlooked humanitarian shelter solution.
By Charles A. Setchell

19 Moving Forward in Busan
A defining moment for both development cooperation and civil society.
By Carolyn Long

DEPARTMENTS

4 Reflections from the President
5 Feedback
9 InfoBytes
22 Best Practices
24 Projects
ALL AROUND THE WORLD, AID RECIPIENTS WANT regular two-way communication with people who provide assistance in their communities. They want more information about aid efforts, to ask questions, to provide feedback and to get responses from aid agencies. Moreover, they want to learn how their ideas, suggestions, complaints and recommendations have influenced decisions about aid programs and strategies. Local people are routinely asked to provide information during assessments, consultations, monitoring visits and evaluations. Yet many feel that they have not been genuinely heard, let alone received a response.

During listening exercises organized by the Listening Project in 20 countries, people asked for ongoing dialogue and regular visits during which community members and aid providers can get to know one another, listen to each other, discuss problems together and jointly find solutions. Overall, many people were disappointed about missed opportunities to share important feedback on the implementation and effects of aid efforts and the performance of aid agencies. They saw regular feedback processes as an important way to be engaged in decisions that directly affect their lives.

Taking stock
The frequency of comments about missing feedback loops and inadequate follow-up procedures suggested the need to take a closer look at existing feedback mechanisms used by international NGOs. Feedback mechanisms provide organizations with data and perceptions from primary stakeholders about the quality and effectiveness of their efforts. An ideal feedback process gathers feedback and communicates a response, which forms a “feedback loop.” The topic is timely, as many donors and NGOs have committed to improve accountability and the quality of their programming. The Listening Project conducted a desk review of over 40 documents and interviewed 25 key personnel across 35 organizations—including a number of InterAction members. What follows are some emerging lessons learned and promising practices in systematizing feedback mechanisms to improve the effectiveness of aid efforts.

Lessons learned
Feedback is valued and linked to improved accountability and effectiveness. Recipient feedback is without a doubt on many organizations’ agendas, as evidenced by numerous, ongoing efforts to develop and test feedback mechanisms and accountability frameworks. Many humanitarian and development agencies recognize that feedback from aid recipients can indeed improve the effectiveness and accountability of their aid efforts, encourage meaningful participation and strengthen relationships with communities. Further, organizations that regularly gather feedback throughout the cycle of their projects report better results and higher satisfaction compared to prior projects that did not include as much recipient feedback. In many cases, operational changes suggested by recipients were not difficult to incorporate, and in some cases led to significant improvements in recipient satisfaction.

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Getting the big picture. Most current feedback processes focus on project-level information. Organizations have used a variety of data collection methods as part of their participatory monitoring and evalu-
ation processes for quite some time. Typically, field staff and local partners gather feedback for use in their ongoing programs and operations. But this feedback is rarely systematized or collated and analyzed at an agency-wide level to inform strategy development. As a result, the organization as a whole does not benefit from the value and richness of the feedback. In effect, opportunities to gather feedback and engage community members in dialogue and joint reflection have always been there, but the practices of systematically listening to and analyzing people’s perspectives, recommendations and complaints have not become routine in many agencies.

**Missing feedback loops.**
Even with the growing attention to recipient voices and the diverse approaches that have been tried, there are not many examples of **sustained feedback loops**, in which information is gathered and communicated in cyclical fashion. Usually, feedback gathered in local communities flows through different parts of an organization, but how this information is used and the decisions that result are rarely communicated back to communities. The few notable examples of feedback loops come from the humanitarian sector, where complaints and response mechanisms have been instituted to manage issues as they arise during emergency responses.

**Management buy-in.** Effective feedback processes require management buy-in. Integrating feedback mechanisms into programming cycles and management systems requires a range of strategies at the headquarters and field levels. For managers to see any value in investing in a feedback system, information has to be reported in a timely manner and in a format that is useful for their decision-making. Managers also play an important role in creating incentives and requirements for field staff to regularly solicit and use feedback.

**Integration.** Build feedback mechanisms into other institutional processes (e.g., strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation, staff and partner performance management).

**Prompt action.** Close the feedback loop by responding in a timely manner; this requires advance planning so quick action is a real option when needed.

**Document and share.** Invest in documenting feedback mechanisms, their influence on decisions and lessons learned, and share the lessons with partners and colleagues.

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**Keys to effective feedback mechanisms:**

- **Leadership support.** Ensure senior leaders are committed to using feedback from aid recipients and that they provide the resources necessary to make the system work.
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**SYSTEMATIC FEEDBACK**

**continued on page 27**

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**continued on page 27**

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**SYSTEMATIC FEEDBACK**

**continued on page 27**
Is it worth it?

The cost of developing and implementing safety and security policies is high, not so much in dollar terms (you can get a very good start for perhaps $15,000), but in terms of staff time that, in focusing on safety and security, crowds out time spent on other important tasks. And safety and security policies and procedures in place don’t mean the end of risk, nor that all risks will be addressed in the best way possible. Policies and procedures, no matter how good, will never take the place of good judgment.

But they will significantly increase staff and board awareness of daily risks, increase the ability to be proactive and reasonable in taking on risk, and provide some tools for risk mitigation and incident response. Whether one agrees or not with the idea that the world is becoming a riskier place, NGOs belong where need is greatest. And that means coming to terms with their responsibilities toward their own staff: not keeping them out of harm’s way, but giving them good tools to assess, knowingly choose, and respond to the consequences of risk. Safety and security policies and procedures “We don’t have one” is no longer an acceptable answer for the mid-sized international NGO.

Questions and comments can be sent to the author, who is currently working as a consultant, at shleisher@aol.com.

Systematic Feedback

continued from page 18 for decision-makers.

Investing in staff. The commitment and competence of field staff is essential in converting commitments to listen into an organizational practice of gathering and responding to feedback. It is important to invest in the development of skills such as open-ended questioning, active listening, critical and analytical thinking, and facilitation both for field staff and local partners, who are most often responsible for gathering and analyzing feedback from affected people and communities. Field staff also need good communication skills, both for explaining the importance of collected feedback to senior managers and policymakers, and for responding effectively to those who have provided it.

Document and share. This is a fairly new area of practice and with so many methods being tested, it is important for agencies to demonstrate how feedback mechanisms can improve policies and programs. Investing in documentation of existing feedback mechanisms, their influence on decisions, and sharing the lessons learned improves joint learning, program effectiveness and coordination.

Promising practices in the field

The study and interviews highlighted a number of practical steps that organizations have already taken to make feedback an effective and ongoing part of their work. Highlights include:

Assessments and scorecards. Several organizations effectively use community-based assessments and scorecards to identify ways to improve their operations. For instance, a local partner of Action Aid in Pakistan organized an “open accountability forum” in which it encouraged men, women and representatives of local government and other civil society organizations to reflect, analyze and critique the organization’s practices. Similarly, CARE Malawi gives community members scorecards to evaluate the quality of public sector services, CARE’s programs and the work of local village committees. Staff then incorporate this feedback into performance management processes and engage community members in an action planning process.

Complaints and response mechanisms (CRMs) are becoming increasingly common in humanitarian responses. For example, Concern Worldwide is piloting a CRM in eight of its country offices. Lessons are already emerging, including the need to design the CRM system with aid recipients’ input. When recipients help decide the most appropriate ways to lodge complaints, the result is feedback mechanisms that work for a broad range of people. The design phase of the mechanism must take into account the local context, determine a locally appropriate name for the mechanism, and identify culturally appropriate channels and methods for people to raise complaints and for agencies to respond to them. A Save the Children office in Gaza, for example, realized that people would not use complaints boxes because the government had ineffectively used them in past attempts to gather feedback.

Multiple means of communicating. Using different communication methods can ensure that traditionally marginalized or minority groups have an opportunity to share their feedback and receive information. In Save the Children’s Pakistan office, the feedback hotline was actively used, but staff eventually realized that men were the primary callers. Cultural constraints and educational barriers make it more difficult for women to call or send written feedback, so the organization introduced several other methods to gather feedback. Similarly, in order to include the voices of women and children, Catholic Relief Services gathers feedback during community visits and during the public’s visits to its offices and help desks, allows people to call program managers’ cell phones to call attention to urgent issues, and uses feedback boxes.

In addition, agencies report that building trust and having good relations with the local community is vital to getting meaningful feedback. Offering clear information about the goals and expectations of the organization is the first step in building trust and should be clearly explained to community members through several different mediums. Agencies signal their respect by following through and responding to feedback, which in turn helps further strengthen trust and credibility. Closing the feedback loops by responding to feedback in a consistent, timely manner ensures that people will believe in the system and will use it. For feedback process to be effective, organizations need to establish systematic procedures for reviewing, investigating and responding to feedback, particularly complaints. This often requires advance planning so that an organization can actually provide prompt and effective response when needs arise.

An effective feedback loop does more than just solicit feedback and provide responses to recipients. It communicates recipient perspectives to key decision-makers and focuses the attention on recipient voices and priorities. The increased focus on accountability to aid recipients and the need to listen and respond to their feedback is therefore encouraging, as are the ongoing efforts to develop new and innovative ways to gather feedback. To stay true to the principle, recipients in particular should be engaged in determining which of these mechanisms are most appropriate and helpful in their contexts. The emerging feedback mechanisms will need to be further assessed to identify good practices, and to provide more guidance to those seeking to improve or establish feedback systems.

To see a complete list of recommendations in the full report please visit www.cdainc.com or contact Isabella Jean at ijean@cdainc.com.