PPA Learning Paper

Beneficiary Feedback: how we hinder and enable good practice

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About Bond

Bond is the UK network for organisations working in international development. We unite and support a diverse network of over 450 civil society organisations and allies to help eradicate global poverty, inequality and injustice. **bond.org.uk**

Background on this report

This report was produced on behalf of Beneficiary Feedback Learning Group. The Beneficiary Feedback Learning Group (BFLG) members consider beneficiary feedback to be a fundamental ingredient in rights-based programming and accountable aid practice. It is the means by which communities and individuals exercise their right to assess the relevance, quality and effectiveness of development and humanitarian interventions. Through feedback mechanisms, constituents have the opportunity to inform, influence, comment on design and critique projects and services that impact their lives. The mechanisms also offer platforms for programme improvement, with the potential to be conducted in rapid and adaptive ways that drive the contextual relevance of aid programming.

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About PPA Learning Partnership

For over 15 years, the Department for International Development's (DFID) Programme Partnership Arrangements (PPAs), which came to an end in December 2016, were DFID's main funding channel for civil society organisations (CSOs). In addition to providing core funding to over 41 CSOs, PPAs allowed many grantees to invest in learning and innovation. While not originally anticipated, a Learning Partnership was established to support the last round of PPAs (2011-2016) to promote collaboration and joint learning between PPA holders and DFID across a range of thematic Learning Groups.

As PPAs ended, three learning groups (Partnership Approaches, Resilience and Beneficiary Feedback) have consolidated their experiences and produced papers summarizing findings and recommendations. Funding for the paper was provided by the Bond.

History of the Beneficiary Feedback Learning Group (BFLG)

The Beneficiary Feedback Learning Group (BFLG) serves as a platform to share, debate and critically engage on topics related to listening and responding to feedback. It was established in 2013, first as a sub-group of the PPA Empowerment and Accountability Learning Group. In July 2014, it began functioning as a separate platform for discussion and sharing practical lessons, tools and peer advice among organisations who gather, analyze, and respond to feedback from community members, local leaders and partners. From the start, the group included DFID and many PPA holders from multi-mandate organisations implementing development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding programming. Group members joined learning events in person or remotely. Participants also included accountability and feedback officers based in country teams outside the UK.

Individual consultants and consulting firms who joined learning events to share lessons emerging from relevant efforts such as Beneficiary Feedback Mechanisms GPAF Pilots, research on Beneficiary Feedback in Evaluation and Keystone Accountability's work on the Feedback Commons and Constituent Voice Methodology, Feedback Labs UK and Accountable Now.

Prior to DFID PPA funding agreements coming to an end in December 2016, the group came under the umbrella of Bond working groups. Since the merger, BFLG continues to serve as a learning platform and a collective body for engaging funders and other stakeholders to support an enabling environment in which feedback can drive increased quality, accountability, adaptability, and rights-based programming. By August 2017, the BFLG has grown to 172 members representing 82 organisations.

About the author

The learning paper was written by Isabella Jean, Director of Collaborative Learning at CDA Collaborative Learning Projects and former co-chair of the Beneficiary Feedback Learning Group. While this paper summarizes select issues and lessons discussed in BFLG learning events and documented in CDA's case studies with PPA learning partners, the views expressed in this paper are those of the author.

Acknowledgements

The paper was inspired and informed by many examples, challenges, promising practices and personal stories shared during and after BFLG learning events and my conversations with my BFLG co-chair, Carla Benham, a remarkable champion of accountability and feedback loops. The paper also draws on several case study visits conducted by my colleague Sarah Cechvala at CDA. Many thanks for review and feedback of an earlier draft by Bond's Effectiveness Adviser, André Clarke.

Introduction

Accountability to the communities we serve has become a focus of sector-wide and organisational commitments, policies and practices in development. Many in the sector consider functioning feedback loops as indicators of broader accountability practice and as mechanisms for improving relevance and effectiveness of development efforts. But does increased attention given to accountability to communities and beneficiary feedback indicate that we have reached a tipping point?

There is widespread agreement that listening and responding to the voices and choices of beneficiaries is the "right thing to do" from a rights-based and ethical perspective. Some argue it is a "smart thing to do" because it results in better outcomes, as well as a "feasible thing to do" because we now have a growing number of tools for gathering and acting on feedback as part of regular practice.[1] In the last decade, we have seen multiple learning initiatives, guidance and tool development to support meaningful and effective engagement with communities.[2] In practice, however, organisations continue to struggle with sustaining feedback loops through funding and project cycles; scaling up project level feedback mechanisms; and demonstrating effectiveness and value of investing into feedback processes.

The Beneficiary Feedback Learning Group (BFLG) members met regularly to discuss challenges and lessons on topics that ranged from processing feedback, organisational behaviour and role of leadership, feedback in conflict-affected settings, and value for money. Group members generously shared examples of their experimentation, promising practices and lessons learned. Below is a selection of examples that were shared and discussed during PPA learning events in 2013-2016 period:

- CARE UK's inclusive governance and social accountability e.g. community scoreboards in Peru
- Development Initiatives work with DRT in Uganda on tracking resource flows
- ActionAid's Participatory Review and Reflections and strategy review
- Oxfam GB's annual accountability review process
- Save the Children's "accountability breakthroughs"
- World Vision UK Accountability Learning Initiatives and lessons from GPAF BFM Pilots
- IPPF's PEER process at project level
- DFID's Fund Manager Survey – mechanism for gathering DFID grantee feedback
- Keystone Accountability's partner survey

BFLG member survey responses and event attendance signalled a steady interest and demand for practical approaches and tools, as well as support for internal champions who continue to make the case for resourcing feedback loops. Where does this demand to improve feedback loops come from? Some organisations have commissioned strategic reviews of local ownership and of the relevance and legitimacy of their assistance efforts as perceived by local communities and stakeholders. There is also increasing pressure from management and donors such as DFID to demonstrate functioning feedback loops and the impact that accountable and participatory processes are having on the quality of aid programmes and on long-term outcomes.

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[1] For more on this framing, see Feedback Labs http://feedbacklabs.org/

[2] Among these initiatives are the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), which continues its work as part of the Common Humanitarian Standard (CHS), IASC Taskforce on Accountability to Affected Populations, ALNAP-CDA Practitioner Guidance on Feedback Mechanisms, Keystone Accountability's Feedback Commons platform, BOND's Beneficiary Feedback Learning Group, Feedback Labs Toolkit and numerous agency-specific resources and efforts to improve responsiveness, engagement and feedback loops with programme participants and constituents.

Consequently, the majority of beneficiary feedback mechanisms have been supply-side initiated. Pressure from management and donors can lead to improvised and generic feedback mechanisms that do not sufficiently match the diverse contextual, cultural and operational needs. What is often missing altogether is space for demand-side, community or civil society driven mechanisms to demand better services. This includes transparency and accountability for funds raised on their behalf and the quality of programmes designed and conducted in their communities. With notable exceptions,[3] much of the feedback is "managed" within a space structured by development organisations and impacted by our organisational priorities, systems and culture. For the most part, we control the process. And yet the fact that people continue to engage with our feedback systems and urge us to respond and to improve shows their faith in our ability to listen, to respond and to make the necessary changes.

This paper summarizes lessons, reflections and areas for further inquiry documented during Beneficiary Feedback Learning Group peer-to-peer learning events, case studies conducted by CDA Collaborative Learning with PPA learning partners and DFID-funded Beneficiary Feedback Pilots. The paper focuses on three select areas which require attention, investment and improvement if we are to increase the impact of feedback practices and strengthen accountability to local communities:

1. Broken feedback loops cannot be fixed with a tool
2. Adaptive management: why local feedback is vital
3. Feedback mechanisms in conflict affected contexts

The above list is not exhaustive of the issues raised in BLFG learning events and case studies. It serves as a discussion starter on barriers and opportunities for organisations seeking to improve feedback loops.

Bond has identified beneficiary engagement, including feedback processes, as an area where its members are interested in good practices documented and tested by peers. DFID has maintained its commitment to beneficiary feedback by embedding it into bilateral and multilateral aid reviews and developing a Beneficiary Feedback Action Plan for CSO funds and projects. Beyond requiring its partners to collect and respond to feedback, DFID has committed to integrating beneficiary feedback into its systems and policy commitments. These are all promising developments that need to be resourced and informed by good practice. This paper suggests several areas for further inquiry to inform future peer-to-peer exchanges, learning and adaptation.

Broken feedback loops cannot be fixed with a tool

Feedback loops within a broader accountability framework

Accountability is fundamentally a political process which requires negotiating power at different levels. Within organisations, this could mean a significant shift in organisational culture, staff attitudes and behaviours, starting from senior leadership to frontline staff. Even when leadership signals that accountability to communities and feedback are important, the discourse needs to match the practice. The practice, however, cannot simply be delegated to project staff or outsourced to partners on the ground. The role of senior leadership and management in modelling, valuing, resourcing and allocating time and capable staff to meet these organisational commitments.

[3] Integrity Action works to empower citizens to act with and demand integrity. https://integrityaction.org/

Accordingly, frontline staff rise to the expectations set for them by their managers and peers. This is particularly true when these expectations are aligned with broader organisational values and culture, such as rights-based development, a commitment to locally-led development and the inclusion of marginalized voices. Essentially this requires "development experts" to be humble about their own role, expert knowledge, contributions and to draw their legitimacy and acceptance from deeper and meaningful engagement with local communities. These values are not just words on posters or periodic reminders at staff meetings. They are observed daily in interactions between staff, managers, partners, and community members. A multitude of implicit ethical messages are communicated and absorbed in the process and the way organisational commitments and philosophies are modelled is important. We can develop a myriad of feedback tools but still fail to significantly shift practice if we do not change how staff see their role and relationship with the people they serve.

Institutional Enabling and Disabling Factors

Technical fixes do not work if the core issue is that accountability to communities is de-prioritized in relation to accountability to donors. Frontline staff and managers who are tasked with reporting to donors routinely face competing demands to demonstrate compliance and progress while also remaining accountable and responsive to communities. Principled commitments that are integral to development practice such as participation and promotion of good governance are often trampled by operational and institutional policies that govern funding arrangements, reporting systems, and institutional rewards and incentives for financial accuracy and timely deliverables and reports. Again, staff behaviours and choices are impacted by the prioritization they observe every day.

In recent years, donors' expectations of their partners have provided a substantial motivation and incentive for putting accountability commitments into practice. Using funding as a powerful incentive, donors have sought to catalyse improved practice by requiring organisations to adopt new ways of operating, reporting and learning. The latter step is often the weakest but, in several cases, where institutional learning and inter-agency learning was encouraged and supported with funding, it has led to joint solutions. Conversely, those same expectations, without continued engagement and support, can lead to cursory use and "tick the box effect," where organisations cite accountability and feedback mechanisms in their reports, but do not use the feedback data to improve their programming. Oftentimes, donors could benefit from an honest conversation - a feedback loop - with their own grantees and local partners about the impact of these requirements and investment in accountability and feedback loops and the barriers created by their competing and shifting agendas.

Internally, staff and partners are often fully aware of how donor expectations shape the response by their senior leadership. The positive deviants in the system are organisations who set the bar high for themselves whether or not donors require them to demonstrate the establishment of accountability and feedback mechanisms. There is no surprise then that numerous case studies and learning events described how people in leadership and management positions can hinder or advance staff commitments and practices related to accountability.

The search for non-technical solutions

PPA learning events and CDA case studies highlighted a range of approaches for enabling effective feedback loops, with a focus on both internal and external factors.

<u>Senior Management Take Notice:</u>

- *Articulate the purpose and tangible results of an effective feedback loop to all staff and partners.* Demonstrate how feedback helps to reduce corruption, results in relevant, appropriate aid and cost-savings, helps to improve perceptions and relationships between community, partners and staff, and contributes to local ownership and sustainability. If you do not have such evidence to demonstrate, speak to your local partners and local communities. Ask them.

- *Explain the benefits of feedback* and the reason we practice accountability in ways that inspires your staff and motivates them to adopt good practice. Be better at articulating *why* we do this.
- *Address the asymmetrical focus on accountability to donors.*
  Ask your local stakeholders, partners and communities what you should report on to them regarding your organisation's accountability commitments. At minimum, report on the changes you have made based on their feedback, explain why certain changes are not possible and indicate areas that are under improvement. Share this report with your donors too.

Box 1: Text Box: Staff skills and capacities.
Frameworks, tools, mechanisms are not enough! Staff require training, coaching and consistent support. Our lessons highlight specific competencies and skills:

- knowing how to listen and respond in a respectful and constructive manner;
- dialogue and facilitation skills for difficult conversations;
- problem-solving skills (and mindsets!) for testing solutions and adapting programmes;
- technical skills set (data analysis, analysis of patterns and trends, data disaggregation and aggregation, sense-making);
- effective communication skills for conveying feedback and its significance to internal and external audiences and users to enable its utilization.

- *Ensure that your institutional policies and procedures allow and encourage systematic listening, feedback collection, response and action.* Here are just a few examples:
  - Establish a feedback mechanism for staff which signals that feedback is part of the organisational culture. Use multiple channels such as staff surveys, suggestion boxes, and group feedback sessions. Ensure that staff feedback is acknowledged, regularly reviewed and responded to. Model closing the loop internally.
  - Set clear expectations for respectful, accountable and responsive engagement with community members in job descriptions, performance reviews and supervisory meetings.
  - Pay attention to who you hire. Review your expectations for core competencies and "soft" skills in community engagement, communication, problem-solving and group facilitation. These are not specialist skills. They are essential to development practice and should be non-negotiable.
  - Invest in capacity development for essential soft skills such as active listening, dialogue and dispute resolution, problem solving and communication that allow for more effective community engagement and conversations.
  - Invest in capacity development for technical skills such as quantitative and qualitative data analysis, data visualization and data presentation that support internal learning, reflection and decision-making processes.
  - Use strategic reviews to take stock of the impact that your feedback system is having on your organisational systems and culture. Ask your staff: have we become more responsive? Are we better at internal information sharing and problem solving?

Box 2: Champions are important, but not sufficient. Accountability to communities is every staff member's responsibility. Designated accountability and feedback specialists or teams tasked with coordinating feedback collection and information flow are important, but it is not feasible to expect that a single person or a small team can single-handedly remain in charge of listening to local communities and closing the feedback loop. Organisations with 'accountability champions' have certainly benefitted from internal advocacy efforts that resulted in increased awareness, sustained attention and (sometimes) increase in resources to support accountability improvements. BFLG features many such champions, many of them exhausted from the constant uphill battle inside their own organisations. But the commitment and responsibility for closing the feedback loop cannot and should not hinge on one person. Often, when internal champions leave the organisation, there is a loss of momentum and capacity that negatively impacts the gains that have been made. The responsibility to listen and consider feedback in day-to-day problem-solving and in programme steering must be diffused to all programme staff and ultimately to management for significant course-corrections that may be required.

Monitoring and Evaluation Specialists Take Notice:

- Integrate outcomes related to accountability and effective feedback loops into your results frameworks and performance indicators. Validate your indicators with local staff, partners and community representatives. Collect meaningful data, triangulate it and review it regularly.
- Ask your evaluators to assess the strength of your feedback mechanisms. Demand beneficiary feedback and partner feedback reviews as part of programme evaluations.
- Schedule periodic reviews of feedback data with relevant thematic and technical specialists (i.e. health, shelter, education, livelihoods, gender, etc), M&E staff, and managers who can influence programme direction. Schedule these wisely around key decision-making points and keep a log of key reflections and decisions. Think about where these should be stored for easy retrieval later during programme re-design and future proposal development.

Programme Managers Take Notice:

- Do not accept sporadic 'tick the box' exercises in lieu of meaningful and sustained feedback processes. Regularly ask your staff what they are hearing and how are they responding to local perspectives and feedback and what surprises them the most.
- Make feedback data trends a standing agenda item in programme staff meetings. When necessary, turn them into action items with concrete follow-up and responsibilities.
- Ask your partners[4] and beneficiaries if your organisation's processes seem opaque to them. Work together to find consensus on the level of transparency and commit to active disclosure of information on aspects that are important to them. Regular information provision helps to mitigate fears, reduce repetitive questions, establish clarity about your projects' goals and entitlements, and often leads to more informed (and more useful) feedback.

[4] See Keystone Accountability Partner Survey methodology and services. https://keystoneaccountability.org/category/partnership-survey/

Box 3: Daily nudges.
During a case study visit in Pakistan, CDA staff observed a programme manager who gathered his frontline team members at the end of each day for a 10-15 minutes long huddle. This was a standing meeting with no laptops or phones allowed with staff standing in a circle. A single question started the meeting: "What did you hear today that concerned you or surprised you?" As examples and issues were brought up, staff were asked to sort them into categories: a) "we can resolve this on our team"; b) "we need to communicate this to senior management for decision/action"; c) "we need to refer this outside our organisation." The manager took note and assigned responsibilities and asked for status reports on previous issues. The meeting ended with "What are you proud of today?"

His staff reported a sense of empowerment when categorizing issues into "we can resolve this right here" category. There was a daily practice of problem-solving which made the incoming complaints and issues less daunting. Staff began to listen for and bring in more examples of how programme aspects could be tweaked or changed significantly in order to solve the recurring issues.

Adaptive management: why feedback is vital

Ultimately, we want to know that our presence, engagement, processes and services are relevant and capable of supporting positive and lasting development outcomes. These outcomes are shaped by dynamic contexts and often complex situations. They are also impacted by periodic shifts in donor and organisational priorities, capacities and commitments. With adaptive management approaches[5] and Doing Development Differently[6] commitments gaining ground, feedback needs to be recognized and elevated as a complementary source of data for quality improvement and course correction.

Aid agencies routinely receive solicited and unsolicited beneficiary feedback. Some of this information is intentionally sought (e.g. during assessments, consultations and community input sessions), some is submitted through established and formal complaints and feedback channels (e.g. hotlines, suggestion boxes, community meetings) and other feedback is received informally during day-to-day contact with beneficiaries. Some of this information is factual and can be triangulated and verified. The rest is perceptions, opinions, perspectives, suggestions or anonymous complaints that are harder to verify. Operational organisations understand that perceptions data can greatly improve assessments of how well we are doing and what else is happening in the context which our indicators can miss.

We also know that failure grows in organisations that neither pay attention to nor act on matters that community members see as important.[7] So what hinders timely analysis, decision making and how can we incentivize the use of feedback data? For some it is clear why we do not have a choice but to continuously improve our performance by listening and acting on feedback. According to one BFLG member:

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[5] See recent Bond paper "Adaptive Management: What It Means for CSOs" https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/adaptive-management-what-it-means-for-csos

[6] Doing Development Differently Manifesto http://doingdevelopmentdifferently.com/

[7] CDA's Listening Project documented the cumulative voice of people in recipient societies who felt that what is measured by the systems used by international organisations does not match the set of issues they consider important. For more, see Anderson, Mary B., Dayna Brown, and Isabella Jean. Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2012.

> *"To work in an adaptive way, we need catalysts that compel response to information that indicates we could be doing something better. It requires a will and incentives to change course, but also a skill set to think critically about data, context, problems and solutions."*

With a nod to product development in the technology sector, development projects could be viewed (and implemented) as perpetually in "beta version" while actively soliciting 'user' input and feedback for improvement. This requires a shift towards designing and adapting programmes with user feedback and a greater role for end users in decision-making.

Feedback Data and Decision-Making

Feedback and complaints, when gathered regularly, triangulated and validated, can serve as valuable data points for decision-making, performance management and quality improvement. Most decision-makers agree in principle that feedback data is part of programme monitoring and performance management. They say that information gathered by Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) teams can be used to inform programme improvements, course corrections, programme re/design, advocacy and sometimes for strategy development.

PPA and Bond learning events and case studies highlighted the fact that most aid agencies do not systematically and deliberately use feedback information in decision-making. Analysis shared by International Rescue Committee at one learning event suggests that feedback information is often 'crowded out' from decision-making processes because it is competing with other, higher prioritized information such as expenditure, procurement, output and activity monitoring data. CDA's case studies have documented examples where local feedback data was crowded-out by real-time evaluation reports, formal evaluations and commissioned studies because evaluation data are perceived as expert opinion, informed by reliable data and methods as opposed to "noise" coming from feedback channels or anecdotal examples picked up by staff. Moreover, feedback and M&E data remain largely disconnected from management systems which lets decision makers operate without regular access to relevant information.

Decision makers weigh information presented to them daily. Their perception of what is representative, reliable, significant, valid and useful are important because it shapes their decision-making process. Some consider only factual data collected with rigorous methods and sampling techniques as 'evidence.'[8] Others attempt to assemble different forms of evidence in front of them, including data from feedback channels before forming conclusions on what the problem is and generating available options and solutions. One country director held regular discussions with staff to review options available for resolving a recurring issue brought up through feedback channels. As the staff weigh different options and offer their opinions and suggestions, she nudges them to link problem-solving to daily observations and other evidence by asking, "What evidence have you used in your assessment of this issue and the options available to us?" Daily routines are shaped by how managers talk about data and evidence and demonstrate its use.

What do decision makers ask for in feedback data?

Decision-making processes are influenced by a range of individual biases, personal rules of thumb and pre-determined organisational priorities and agendas. Often, it is also influenced by how decision makers digest the feedback data presented to them. Recurring observations were raised in PPA learning

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[8] INTRAC, Praxis Paper 28. Getting to Grips with Evidence: How NGOs can tackle changing needs in the use of evidence and research, November 2013 https://www.intrac.org/resources/praxis-paper-28-getting-grips-evidence-ngos-can-tackle-changing-needs-use-evidence-research/ See also, Bond Evidence Principles https://www.bond.org.uk/monitoring-and-evaluation/monitoring-and-evaluation-tools

events, peer-to-peer discussions and case studies:

- Accessibility and ease of use. Decision makers do not have time to read through long reports, review spreadsheets and raw data. They want feedback data presented in a concise, visually organized format (i.e. graphs, pie charts, dashboards). They want the quantitative data and graphs to be supplemented by an analysis and interpretation of the trends in feedback data. They want compelling feedback summaries that can be used for programme steering. And they want to see the personal stories that illustrate critical points. One manager said, "We need numbers but also stories. Numbers should not leave out stories that bring texture and nuance."
- Timeliness and appropriate timing for decision-making. For sensitive complaints, senior management establish a clear protocol for escalating urgent issues to management and for follow-up and internal accountability for action. For non-sensitive feedback, staff require a solid understanding of key decision-making points in the project and programme cycle.
- Aggregated feedback for future programme design and operational course corrections. Most feedback processes focus on project-level information and have very little influence on institutional policies and practices. Few examples were available where data from feedback mechanisms was regularly informing institutional processes such as strategic planning, institutional learning, staff and partner performance management. Day-to-day implementation feedback can be addressed by problem-solving project teams and partners. Senior decision makers want to see aggregated and cumulative feedback from across the projects on key issues consistently raised by community members. These can be issues that fall outside the current mandate, that challenge the assumptions underlying current programme design and theories of change and call for a different type of engagement.
- Improved documentation of decisions and closing the loop. The most common problem in understanding how decisions are made and based on what evidence is that the process is rarely transparent or documented. What is clear from field-based case studies is that the decision-making process is rarely transparent to the frontline staff, let alone local communities and stakeholders. When senior management does not communicate their decision to relevant staff, they have a hard time closing the loop and informing the communities. Senior managers often struggle to reconstruct the institutional memory of how certain course corrections were decided on and what data was used to inform them. We have seen some effective use of decision logs for significant decisions that organisations grappled with. In learning events, headquarters staff also confirmed the continued need to document the influence of feedback in decisions, the lessons learned in the process and to share it with relevant organisational units and with donors.

Text box 4. Experimenting to improve utilization of feedback data

- How should feedback data be presented to stimulate use in decision-making?
- What influences managers' perception about the utility and validity of feedback data?
- Who needs to hear what, in what format, with what frequency?

To answer these questions, CDA recently ran an experiment with a development organisation working in rural Haiti. Community feedback was not systematically recorded which made aggregating data and trends analysis of feedback difficult, particularly when it was shared verbally and informally. Because feedback information was not accompanied by quantitative data analysis, it raised doubt within the programme management teams as to the validity and reliability of community feedback and its utility in programme quality improvements and course corrections. CDA tested a hypothesis that an improved process for documentation, analysis and reporting, with an increased focus on quantitative data and analysis will strengthen and advance the quality of feedback loops in programming and increase the use of feedback by decision-makers. We identified two problems and solutions to test:

Problem 1: The perception of programme management about validity and reliability of community feedback was weak and needed improvement. To ensure that community feedback was viewed as legitimate and useful for decision-making, the process by which feedback was gathered, triangulated and analysed had to be optimized. The problem solving in this case has largely focused on a) reviewing and improving feedback documentation and analysis methods and b) effectively communicating the improved process to all internal stakeholders and feedback users.

Problem 2: Timely and user-friendly feedback summary reports for management were not used. Process improvement in this area required input from management on how frequently they wanted to see feedback summaries, in what format and level of detail, and with what follow-up process for accountability and for programme staff to close the loop.

Pre- and post- survey data, interviews and observations from accountability staff showed modest improvement in manager's receptivity to requesting and using data with higher and more frequent use. More significant course corrections to the original programme were not documented in the experiment's time period due to a sudden onset disaster which severely impact the programme area and resulted to a swift shift to emergency response. However, the mixed methods for feedback data collection were maintained throughout the emergency response and the feedback data was regularly presented to management.

Political will and motivation to change course

Some feedback, especially in its cumulative form, may challenge the status quo, question your organisation's theories of change and the rationale for certain types of programming. But even when feedback leads to dialogue and recognition of substantial areas for improvement, the will and motivation to change course is not easily generated or sustained. The rewards and incentives to stay the course are great. Internal champions who attended PPA/Bond learning events observed that there are few or no real incentives for managers and staff to focus on beneficiaries' priorities and to use feedback regularly in decisions that run counter to overarching incentives structure in an organisation.

Organisational development experts analyse the triggers for managers and decision-makers to change course and adapt by looking at organisational and donor attitudes to adaptation. Behavioural insights teams offer their own diagnosis and solutions for how to nudge individuals to create new routines and change behaviours, even when it comes to use of information.[9] There are many assumptions about the extent to which civil society actors and donors are truly receptive to such change and a need for more frank conversations about this between funders and grantees.

Box 6: Too much of a good thing? The benefits and pitfalls of decentralized decision-making

Most would agree that feedback gathered, analysed and used routinely at the "point of service" or "on the frontlines" to improve services and processes is the cornerstone of good practice in adaptive programme management. CDA has documented examples in international development and humanitarian programmes where frontline staff respond quickly, adjust plans and timelines accordingly, and make local level programme changes based on incoming feedback. They effectively close multiple small feedback loops, week after week. But do many small closed feedback loops automatically add-up to significant and lasting programme improvements? How are these changes communicated and understood at different levels of the organisation, where overall programme steering and strategic decisions take place? How do we share and learn from aggregated feedback internally and externally to avoid repeating same mistakes in the future?

When field staff function with a level of autonomy in a de-centralized institutional structure, much of their adaptive actions often go undocumented and do not trickle up to the right team in the institutional hierarchy in charge of programme quality, institutional learning and programme design. What is more troubling is that feedback which frontline staff cannot resolve at the local level often gets lost among the many layers of internal referral pathways.

Recent discussions about adaptive management[10] point to the benefit of having decision-making authority located as close to the frontline staff and partners as possible in order to enable timely, frequent and effective adaptation. Such observations mirror lessons from customer facing businesses that allow their frontline staff to act swiftly and fix issues at the point of service. This is a veritable challenge for institutional learning teams to tackle when it comes to setting up effective learning mechanisms for capturing the lessons from these real-time feedback and adaptation loops!

[9] Draft study by IRC and CDA on feedback utilization and use of behavioral insights (Forthcoming October 2017).
[10] Duncan Green, Poverty to Power Blog https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/empowerment-and-accountability-in-nigeria-pakistan-myanmar-and-mozambique-need-your-advice/

Feedback mechanisms in conflict affected contexts

Feedback loops in conflict affected settings are particularly challenging due to restricted access, political pressures, and ethical and conflict sensitivity considerations in the choice of data collection, information provision and participatory processes in general. Establishing feedback loops in restricted and conflict-affected settings, requires an added vigilance and sensitivity given the safety concerns for both the recipients and aid providers.[11]

Humanitarian actors who operate in an increasingly politicized and militarized environment recognize multiple purposes for feedback mechanisms that have become central to humanitarian accountability. Viewed from a strategic angle, trusted feedback mechanisms can ensure regular communication to populations affected by crisis and improve trust, safety and security of their own staff. This opens up a whole swathe of secondary purposes for beneficiary feedback mechanisms apart from soliciting views on the performance of aid providers. It also raises the question of reliability of beneficiary mechanisms as a real barometer of people's opinions in situations of stress where frank and open discussion may be constrained by security concerns of the respondents themselves. What then are the auxiliary mechanisms to triangulate what beneficiary feedback is telling us under these circumstances?[12]

Organisations have legitimate concerns that participatory and inclusive processes can slow down programme implementation, bring disagreement and contradictions into the process, and open "pandora's box" of "issues beyond our control." When local people regularly voice an opinion such as "we need less food aid and more livelihoods support" or "why is your agency working with returning refugees only, you should also support those who stayed here during the war" or "your aid practices are causing harm and inter-group tensions" this feedback touches on higher-order programme priorities, decisions made at leadership level and/or country level strategies. This "big picture feedback" is qualitatively different from day-to-day feedback and complaints (i.e. preferences of aid items; requests for specific immediate service improvements, or complaints about staff conduct).

In one PPA partner case study in Pakistan, field staff explained that the feedback mechanism was creating challenges in relation to their work by eroding relationships with community members. They saw the mechanism generating information that they felt they had no ability to respond to because it was perceived to be beyond the scope of their programmes. This was a migrant community marginalized by their status vis-à-vis the surrounding host communities and many underlying tensions had the possibility of escalating if expectations were not managed well.

In Nepal**,** community members' feedback was commonly directed at the post-earthquake response, with a focus on housing and infrastructure damaged during the 2015 earthquake. During the visit to document PPA-funded accountability initiative, some of these urgent issues and unmet needs fell outside the mandate of the international development organisation working in the area. This situation was further exacerbated by two factors 1) the government's slow response to housing and infrastructure reconstruction projects; and 2) the emergency response phase out in certain areas. CDA's experience demonstrates that if such concerns continually go unaddressed, and if community expectations are quite high particularly in terms of institutional capacities and willingness to respond, that this could eventually generate issues between the organisation and its communities. This is further compounded by challenges that directly affect the implementation of development programming.

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[11] Jean, Isabella, Tim Midgley, and Michelle Spearing. "CCVRI Help Desk Request and Response: Beneficiary Feedback in Fragile and Conflict Affected States (FCAS)," a product of the Conflict, Crime, and Violence Results Initiative (CCVRI). London: DFID, 2013.

[12] See, IRC's Client Voice and Choice initiative and Ground Truth Solutions pilot case study C: health in Syria. https://www.rescue.org/report/ircs-client-voice-and-choice-initiative-and-ground-truth-solutions-pilot-case-study-c-health

Finally, one of the recurring questions that requires further inquiry is whether feedback mechanisms can be effectively used to monitor conflict sensitivity. BFLG members with country programmes in Myanmar, South Sudan and Jordan were interested in documenting promising practices in opening feedback channels for context monitoring in addition to programme monitoring. However, the experience with such multi-purpose channels was short-lived in all three cases and eventually the feedback mechanisms were focused largely on soliciting and gathering beneficiary perspectives and complaints related to quality of programming and not on unintended effects of operational and programming choices on inter-group dynamics or changes in the local context.

All projects have their side-effects, sometimes positive, sometimes negative, and this is true for conflict zones and beyond. Often these affect people's lives more than the project's intended benefits. An understanding and an accurate assessment of project effects, through monitoring and feedback channels, must also monitor unintended effects. CDA encourages organisations to consider setting up their feedback mechanisms in ways that would allow this and is keen on hearing about examples of such mechanisms.

In closing

Recognition, attention and innovation on feedback is growing, which is a good thing. There is much excitement about the use of communication technologies for feedback collection, data visualization and for sustaining continuous feedback loops in the aid sector. But many agencies continue to be challenged with methodological, institutional and operational challenges described in the sections above.

Across CDA's PPA and other case studies and advisory work, we note an interesting and contradictory trend. There is a growing interest in evaluative thinking and feedback loops and realization that frontline staff, local partners, community members and programme participants should all be part of this – be the "users" of data, information, and lessons. If we truly strive for rapid feedback and learning cycles, we all need improved skills to be able to think more evaluatively and critically about what we hear, see and do. But feedback on its own will not move mountains! Feedback should be used as part of the broader 'bundle of evidence' that informs NGO decision-making, enabling rapid learning and adaptation at project, programme or organisational level. Adaptive management approaches that are currently being tested by DFID, USAID and their grantees would greatly benefit from experimentation with increased access to and use of beneficiary feedback along with other forms of data. There is much to be learned about what works and what does not and these lessons could benefit the sector.

Below are other areas for further inquiry suggested during BFLG events:

- What is required in terms of resources, capacities and methods for beneficiary feedback mechanisms to function at scale? Does the assumption that technology can act as a catalyst of feedback allowing analysis of feedback at scale hold up based on recent experience?
- What is the value for money considerations and examples of cost-effective beneficiary feedback processes?
- What are the latest effective practices in reaching and engage the most marginalized in feedback processes? How do we amplify the voices of the poorest in ways that allows for real engagement?
- What shifts are required for institutional incentives and rewards to make the use of feedback in decision-making routine?

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