

# WHAT HAPPENS WHEN FEEDBACK MECHANISMS ARE ENHANCED IN SMALL- AND MEDIUM-SIZED UK AID-FUNDED DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS?

## Introduction

Feedback from participants in international development projects (also known as “beneficiary feedback”) is recognised as a critical element of effective, participatory and empowering development programming. Fundamentally, people should have the opportunity to inform and influence projects and services that affect their lives. Feedback processes have the potential to drive greater accountability, responsiveness, more appropriate programming and ultimately better outcomes. They also promote ownership of development interventions, promote learning, help prevent wastage and leakage, and can protect people by providing channels for abuses to be reported in confidence. Feedback processes cut across various areas of development practice including project management, adaptive management, safeguarding and monitoring, evaluation and learning.

In 2019 FCDO (formerly DFID), together with fund manager Mannion Daniels, invited UK Aid Direct<sup>1</sup> grant holders to take part in a “feedback pilot” in which they would make enhancements to their projects’ feedback mechanisms and track the effects of this on project delivery, participation and outcomes.

The basis for these enhancements was firstly [Bond’s 8 principles of feedback](#), a paper produced in 2018 by Bond’s working group on feedback and accountability; and secondly, a set of principles that feature prominently in Integrity Action’s<sup>2</sup> work and which FCDO was interested to explore in this context:

- **Open feedback**, where feedback from participants is displayed openly (often in an aggregated form), with the potential to provide strong incentives to implementers to respond to feedback as a matter of priority.
- **Fast (or even real time) feedback**, where the time taken to submit feedback, respond to it, and act on it, is minimised – in some cases, feedback can be submitted and displayed in real time. As highlighted in [DFID’s Digital Strategy 2018-20](#), this has the potential to produce faster responses to feedback as well as faster programme adaptations. Faster responses to feedback may also be better at building trust between implementers and participants.
- **Citizen-led feedback**, where participants have maximum control and ownership of the feedback system, choosing what feedback they give and when they give it, rather than waiting to be asked and having little control over what they are asked. The aim here is to ensure participants feel empowered to give feedback that represents their genuine feelings.

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<sup>1</sup> UK Aid Direct is funded by the UK Government’s Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and supports small and medium sized civil society organisations to deliver the Global Goals. <https://www.ukaidirect.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Integrity Action is a UK-based non-profit which supports citizens living in poverty to hold to account the essential services and projects that are too often failing them. <https://integrityaction.org/>

Integrity Action provided initial guidance and a workshop on how feedback mechanisms could be enhanced along these lines, and then four UK Aid Direct grant holders volunteered to take part in the pilot. Each grant holder proposed enhancements to make to their UK Aid Direct-funded project. These projects were:

- **Promoting the use of livestock markets to 35,557 pastoralists in Marsabit County in Kenya**, implemented by **Food for the Hungry**. The project intended to promote behaviour change, gender integration, strengthen management of two strategically important livestock markets in Jirime and Moyale and increase market vibrancy by linking traders and producers.
- **Supporting the transformation of Baby Homes into Family and Child Support Centres in Tajikistan**, implemented by **HealthProm**. The project implemented a family-centred approach aiming to strengthen parental capacity on childcare and child development, including comprehensive family and child needs assessments, implementation of individual care plans and evaluation of the results.
- **Water and sanitation for rural villages in Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone**, implemented by **WellFound**. The project aimed to provide sustainable access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, promote gender equality and enhance community economic activities for 15 villages living in poverty in Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone.
- **Breaking the Bonds: freedom through education and economic empowerment for Musahar girls in Nepal**, implemented by **Street Child**. The project provides a holistic and integrated intervention focused on self-sufficiency and improved life opportunities for girls aged 15-18 through an accelerated learning programme; transition into employment or entrepreneurship; and a comprehensive life skills programme.

The grant holders implemented enhancements to their feedback mechanisms from January 2020, and Integrity Action checked in with them during this process and then organised interviews with project staff in late 2020 and early 2021. This learning paper presents the findings from this pilot.

It is important to note a number of limitations:

- The findings presented here are largely derived from conversations with project implementers – it was not within our remit (or capacity) to organise direct conversations with project participants or stakeholders.
- The grant holders were not provided with any additional funding with which to implement enhancements to their feedback systems, so all enhancements involved either repurposing existing funding to create new tools or adapting/improving existing mechanisms.
- All of the projects were impacted heavily by the COVID-19 pandemic. This limited, to some extent, the enhancements they could implement. However, as we will expand upon below, it also provided an opportunity to learn about how feedback mechanisms can help projects to adapt to a contextual change of this scale.

We would like to thank the four grant holders for their participation in the pilot and the learning paper presented here, as well as fund manager Mannion Daniels for supporting the process throughout.

## What feedback tools and practices were tried, and which were most successful in generating both quantity and quality<sup>3</sup> of feedback?

The tools identified were classified according to two categories: mechanisms for feedback collection, and mechanisms for storing and analysing feedback and closing the feedback loop.<sup>4</sup>

### Tools to collect feedback from the community

Given the lack of additional funding, **most of the feedback channels and practices identified during this pilot corresponded to enhanced traditional monitoring mechanisms such as community committees or the collection of feedback through project officers and field teams.** Perhaps not surprisingly, these mechanisms were **shown to be more sustainable and effective than alternatives, mainly because they did not imply significant added costs or administrative requirements.** All four implementers mentioned having trained or instructed part of the project staff to receive, address and escalate data collected from participants, and increase staff awareness regarding the importance of feedback for project success and sustainability.

These trained staff would collect feedback from the community either during planned project meetings, through newly created community feedback committees or in unplanned one-to-one and group conversations done during field visits. Of these, the creation of community feedback committees or nomination of representatives at community level have been the most successful and sustainable mechanisms, particularly as the COVID-19 pandemic forced many of the regular visits to the communities to be cancelled.

Analysis in Kenya, for example, shows that 80% of the project feedback given was received in one-on-one sessions with community members. Equally, in Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone, the most effective method was for the project team to collect participants' feedback during community project sessions, which "would allow for more complex issues to be raised in detail later" during specifically organised smaller sessions. Implementers in Nepal also learned that "people worked better in small groups, with leaders in those small groups bringing the ideas forward as a group". Experiences in Tajikistan (despite changing their interactions from face-to-face to online or telephone calls), also showed that one-to-one or small group conversations encouraged strong engagement. Given that no additional funding was provided (and because of time constraints), implementers transformed already existing monitoring mechanisms (community and project platforms) into opportunities in which feedback could be raised and collected. Some of these later evolved into specific community feedback committees, when participants took the initiative to create them.

Despite relative success, these mechanisms had **room for improvement**, for example in the case of the community committees, the phone number of the staff was given to the community from the onset, but **staff did not receive feedback calls from the community until phone credit was provided to the community leaders.** Implementers also reported that **having smaller committees or feedback groups or giving specific spaces for minorities<sup>5</sup> to express their**

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<sup>3</sup> By "quality" of feedback, we refer to whether the feedback is substantive and sufficiently rich in information or comment that it can lead to learning and/or action.

<sup>4</sup> *Closing feedback loop* refers to reverting to the individuals, groups or community that gave feedback, and explaining what is or isn't being done about it and why.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of these were the creation of sub-committees or monitoring groups attended only by youth or women.

**opinion resulted in feedback that was more substantive. One-on-one sessions in Kenya were lengthy and thus not efficient from the point of view of the project teams,** and information needed to be verified informally with other members of the community to ensure its validity. Yet most information provided in those spaces was useful and led to wider community conversations and project modifications.

**Grant holders also planned or used innovative mechanisms for data collection** including radio talk shows, online questionnaires, communication boards, a toll-free number managed by personnel speaking local dialects, modified suggestion boxes (asking people to provide their feedback through happy and sad faces)<sup>6</sup> or use of social media, websites and online newsletters.

**Success in these cases varied, with radio shows in rural Kenya or social media/websites in urban/semi-urban Tajikistan resulting in high engagement from the intended participants. Yet in most cases these tools were not massively successful.** The toll-free number for example was created at some expense, but the project team implementing it didn't receive a single call. The suggestion boxes/containers and communication boards did not seem to add much value either, even when implementers tried to mitigate barriers like low literacy levels by using visual aids (happy or sad faces). The main reason for this lack of success was that community members felt uncomfortable in providing feedback in public spaces, but also that even after modifying the tools to account for low literacy, the instructions and "survey question" needed to be read which meant that many members of the community would not understand what they were being asked.

Even though implementers aimed to make feedback processes as open and welcoming as possible, community members' past experiences of giving feedback, and/or their past interactions with power holders, were seen as powerful determinants of whether they would use certain feedback mechanisms. In all contexts there was **an inherent reluctance to provide feedback, especially negative. This was either the result of previous experience showing the potential risks of being outspoken** (either backlash from the community or service providers) **or because previous feedback did not produce any change.** Successful tools tended to be the ones that had been used for some time, resulted in fewer/lesser risks for those providing the feedback and/or resulted in positive changes.

**Levels of initial reluctance and mistrust started to change at different points for the pilots and for specific tools. Mechanisms in which feedback was provided directly, especially on a one-to-one basis or in smaller committees, were associated with participants being more open and engaging. Face-to-face tools tended to work better because they created a sense of importance and relationship between those providing feedback and those receiving it.** Smaller feedback committees were more useful than larger ones, especially those committees in which vulnerable or marginalised populations could speak privately or alongside others in the same situation. Smaller groups could also mitigate the risk of "traditional community leaders" monopolizing the conversations.

In the contexts **where remote tools needed to be used,** success really depended on the ability of the population to access those tools<sup>7</sup>, and the incentives to use them. **In the particular case of this pilot, the COVID-19 pandemic created an environment where telephone or online feedback was necessary and thus was quickly normalised.** Some mechanisms such as toll-free

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<sup>6</sup> Piloted but not fully implemented, as programme staff realized it was not being used and could be confusing for the community.

<sup>7</sup> For example, access to internet or funding available to pay for data or phone calls. Even toll-free numbers in Kenya have an issue, as connecting to them (at least in Kenya) require the caller to have funds available associated with pre-paid plans or be associated with a post-paid plan (which is not feasible for the majority of the population in the area).

numbers did not work, but others such as the use of social media groups, WhatsApp or telephone conversations became more widely used.

In general, a common **lesson learned in these pilots was how important it was to adapt to the context. Radio shows were successful in Marsabit County because radio was already a tool used by the community to transmit news and generate open discussion.** Most of the feedback communicated by radio was also very specific, focusing on common areas of interest like livestock markets and COVID-19 information. Information shared there was also largely positive, and the implementers were not only looking for the community to present complaints but were also encouraging people to share success stories. In Tajikistan, social media and webpages were successful mainly once the face-to-face mechanisms were suspended, and because internet access was relatively high across project participants.

### Tools for storing, analysing and communicating data

There was not much divergence in this area, with **all four interventions reporting using a feedback tracking database template (mainly using Excel or Word) and boards/newsletters/meetings to share progress.** Many of these databases were also posted online or results shared through social media and radio. The **key difference was regarding how this information was being used and how often results or progress were being communicated back to the communities.** In general, it was found that:

- **Displaying feedback publicly, particularly in rural areas,** raised challenges as many people were illiterate and would be embarrassed to admit it, instead of requesting help to understand what was being published. Publicly displayed feedback in two of the cases also became a source of disagreement and dispute between participants and implementers.
- **Feedback was better received when there were spaces within which to discuss the process that was followed to obtain a result (or not) or request clarifications.** For example, with direct one-to-one interactions, radio-shows or community platforms, the grantees observed that the participants would engage in a more positive manner and sometimes would take responsibility to follow up or agree a community response to exert pressure on duty bearers.
- **Data collection mechanisms can also become tools in which progress is shared and discussed.** For example, Community-based Feedback Committees would start their discussion by sharing the status/progress of previous issues and/or discussing how more progress could be achieved. The weekly radio show in Kenya also started by sharing progress or instructing listeners to raise their voices with community leaders to increase the likelihood of change in some areas. Finally, the social media parents' forum in Tajikistan would share positive news, including areas in which the authorities had changed or adapted delivery as a result of the programme, and providing instructions on how to use the new services. **Those interviewed believe that by sharing progress as a starting point, these mechanisms increased the level of trust from the communities, thus leading to more people being willing to participate and provide their feedback using those means.**
- **Higher costs (in terms of time and human capital) were reported for the processes associated with storage and use of feedback, rather than for feedback collection.** As mentioned before, data collection tools mainly built on existing mechanisms of community engagement, so data collection did not represent major added costs. **The biggest issue that the grantees faced was when and how to log the additional information received, and in particular what to do with the information.** Feedback mechanisms put pressure on project teams to provide solutions to these questions. In some cases, **Standard Operating Procedures and Responses (SoPR) or Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) were agreed,**

**and this allowed the organisations and teams to more quickly respond and update the logs.** In other cases, the logs were quickly abandoned or not followed up on, and responses were provided only when required or during quarterly reports. A key conclusion is thus the need to agree from the outset upon the processes and responsibilities regarding responding to feedback, as well as managing the time needed to review and analyse the information.

### How were the feedback mechanisms adjusted to respond to COVID-19?

**The pandemic triggered both a more urgent need for dialogue (in order to respond to the socio-economic, health and psychological issues that arose) as well as the need for new channels of communication. In particular, the pandemic incentivized the transition to remote monitoring mechanisms, including radio, phone and the use of online mechanisms.** In Tajikistan, the project started to distribute a parent survey form electronically and saw an increase in the number of visits and users of the website/Facebook page, once face-to-face meetings were cancelled. Furthermore, telephone calls were made for those participants that did not seem to have access to the internet. These participants were also provided with telephone numbers to access/request more information when needed. Finally, paper versions of key information and changes to the project were shared during home visits.

Also, in **two of the four projects, surveys and questionnaires were updated to include questions and advice related to specific issues that could arise during the pandemic, including questions such as "how does self-isolation affect family relationships?", or "what additional difficulties have arisen associated with impact of COVID-19?"**.

Finally, **in all four cases, surveys or small interviews were carried out to assess the impacts of COVID-19 and identify potential areas in which the project needed to adapt and respond to new challenges.** This meant that the role of feedback mechanisms expanded: they were not only tools to hear and address participants' views and complaints about the project, but also mechanisms to assess participants' changing needs in relation to the external context. Both of these could, and did, lead to project adaptations. **In the context of the pandemic, where in many cases the changes and adaptations took development organisations and civil society organisations by surprise, these mechanisms were extremely useful to support adaptability and responsiveness to crisis.** The results of these adaptations are explained below.

### What effect did the feedback mechanisms have?<sup>8</sup>

While it is difficult to say definitively what effect the enhanced feedback mechanisms had – and even harder to say what effect the enhancements had, in comparison to the mechanisms as they were before – at least some of the grantees felt the following effects could be linked to the greater emphasis on feedback within these projects during 2020.

#### Consolidation of community ownership

The **first effect was the consolidation of community ownership of the project, which included communities being more open to providing feedback, committed to demanding change and particularly less afraid of doing this.** In terms of ownership, the case studies revealed an **increased willingness by the community to raise issues with duty bearers directly**, where previously the grant holder had acted as an intermediary. For example, in Tajikistan parents "collectively decided to write a letter of appeal to the Minister of Health to be allowed to come to the Family Centres to get services during the pandemic. This action (...) demonstrated their self-

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<sup>8</sup> This could include project design and adaptations made, delivery and workload, community engagement and inclusion, outputs/outcomes/impact etc.

confidence and willingness to make decisions". In Kenya, the "community rallied together to put pressure on local elected officials to encourage resolution" of problems. In particular, the radio shows were used to spread the message on why changes had not been implemented and get the community to demand action from local leaders. **Community-coordinated action was seen as an effective mechanism to achieve greater accountability.**

### Increased confidence of participants

Furthermore, all implementers using community platforms for dialogue mentioned that **the confidence of the participants started to "slowly build up", as well as observing the birth of new community leaderships, particularly among youth and women.** Two of the grantees mentioned this shift, with one noting that "people (were) initially very reserved within larger groups, especially those from vulnerable populations such as women, children/youth, elderly, people with disability", but later examples showed them "starting to participate in wider community meetings or engaging directly with local authorities to solve the problems". **Increasing participation of marginalised populations was stronger when specific groups of population, with similar issues of exclusion, were brought together to voice their views and demands within smaller groups (e.g., separating older and younger women in two groups). Social media, on the other hand, had a strong reception with young participants.**

### More inclusive collection of feedback; increase in intergenerational trust and dialogue

Specifically for women and youth, these pilots allowed for the identification of additional issues of exclusion and created specific smaller spaces to allow for more inclusive feedback collection. In general, all four grant holders mentioned that as the UK Aid grant process specifically required project efforts to be directed towards marginalised populations, **most of the project beneficiaries were women, children or youth. As a result, feedback obtained mainly came from these populations.** Yet when community participation was analysed, for example in Kenya, it became clear that younger girls' voices were largely silent during all-female groups, as a result of unwritten age hierarchies or fear.

As a result, smaller private sessions were created for these younger girls only. Information provided within those sessions did not differ greatly in comparison with that given in larger groups, but the opportunity to provide feedback empowered those young women to participate. For example, when feedback data collection was moved online, it was the younger girls who took the responsibility for collecting the data and gathering the female community. In some cases, brief recordings of the sessions were sent, particularly of issues that the groups wanted to emphasize. This meant an **increase in trust/dialogue between different generations, with older women more willing to allow space for the voices of those young women and to engage with them in finding solutions for the concerns expressed, as it was seen as a common gender goal.**

### Behavioural change in household gender dynamics around decision-making

Female participants also reported an unexpected behavioural change. **Husbands and male household members started to get more involved in household discussions,** including how they should collaborate in household decision-making and also include women in more financial and economic decisions. This was attributed mainly to project interventions (most of which focused on providing increased livelihood opportunities for women). Yet, female beneficiaries also recognized that their husbands were more willing to include them in household decision-making processes as their participation in public spaces became more normalised.

### Project adjustments based on feedback provided

**Secondly, feedback mechanisms informed project adjustments and** provided a robust basis on which to make project design change requests to funders. For example, in Sierra Leone, young

participants pointed out that one of their reasons for unstable participation was that youth needed to move as a result of seasonal labour. The project was then able to set a rotating mechanism that would allow young participants to nominate their replacement when needed, thus ensuring that young voices were consistently heard. In Nepal, the project design underwent many changes since the start of the project, particularly the introduction of the possibility to include boys as project participants. This was a big change in project design, which the fund manager accepted thanks to the strong evidence provided via feedback.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly in Kenya, feedback pointed to the need to revive local community markets for livestock. The town markets, which were previously recommended as the focus of the project, were too far away for many participants, and feedback highlighted how this was limiting women's participation. This was because it was not possible for women to leave their households for such long periods of time (especially for female-headed households), or because it would not be acceptable in the community for them to travel such long distances without a male. After project consultations at the organisational level, the project leads made a decision to support local markets and focus on measuring the increase of women's participation in livestock trading activities.

### Increased understanding and engagement of community

**Thirdly, feedback mechanisms also allowed grantees to identify areas in which the community was confused regarding some of the activities (in terms of time/date, scope or justification), and provided spaces in which the project teams could clarify this information and address doubts.** This resulted in an increase in engagement of the community in project activities and is "expected to lead to stronger outcomes".<sup>10</sup>

### Compliance and corruption issues identified and in some cases, addressed

**Fourthly, feedback mechanisms allowed the community to identify and solve issues related to the corruption or lack of compliance by local duty bearers (e.g., local officials delivering projects and services that were separate to the UK Aid-funded projects).** Interviews mentioned that feedback mechanisms helped to showcase when "work that local authorities had promised was not completed", instances in which "local leaders/elders (failed) to distribute funding as per agreements" or cases when project (or government) funding was used in areas different to those agreed upon. **This identification led in some cases to positive results, including the fulfilment of promises or the redirection of funding to the areas initially agreed upon.** In Tajikistan, for example, agreements made in terms of equipment and funding were raised with local authorities, and they addressed the issues raised after a short period.

**On the other hand, in many cases the identification of issues did not lead to changes or to greater accountability, particularly when agreements/funding were not under the control of the grantee.** In Kenya, Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone, those raising similar issues related to corruption and compliance with local authorities were only given a "justification for not being done" but there has so far not been any changes observed. Regardless of the effectiveness in increasing accountability or not, these findings represent a spillover effect, where improved feedback and accountability within the project contributes to increased or improved feedback and accountability processes outside the project. This could be worthy of further investigation.

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<sup>9</sup> The project design originally focussed on homeless girls due to evidence that they were more vulnerable, however feedback indicated that COVID-19 had caused homeless boys to reach a similar level of vulnerability by limiting their mobility. Girls and female youth revealed that they were sharing their food with boys and that it was difficult for them to "have something to eat and a place to stay, while their friends and 'family' were excluded because of their gender".

<sup>10</sup> To be measured upon finalisation of the projects, with two projects ending in December 2020 and others expecting to end in mid-2021.

## How did the feedback mechanisms help the projects to adjust to COVID-19?

Another interesting impact of the pandemic on feedback processes was that it provided “real life” case studies to review how these tools could help project teams to adapt to highly complex situations and ensure that the effectiveness of the interventions was not diminished. Besides the examples already mentioned above, three additional cases of adaptation were found.

### Food assistance incorporated in project plan following feedback

Three of the projects reported that during lockdown, “livelihoods completely stopped” bringing “incomes down” and increasing the need for the projects. In Nepal, weekly phone calls revealed that the participants did not have sufficient access to food, which led to a rapid assessment to determine what the specific needs were and assess the possibility of malnutrition. This **evidence was then used to include food assistance in the project design, which resulted in participants becoming more engaged in learning activities and achieving better results in their exams.** According to the grantee, this was outside their “comfort zone”, but without it the project wouldn’t have worked, and that gave them the possibility to implement new activities.

### New services included in project delivery following feedback

**Expansion into new services and outputs also occurred in all other projects as a result of feedback provided by the community.** In Kenya, the expansion was even greater, with the project ending up providing Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), WASH facilities, training for Livestock Management Committees (LMCs) and community health workers for the consolidation of public warning systems and using radio talk shows to share public health messages and recommendations on hygiene and use of face masks. These additional activities were selected by community beneficiaries in a specific project committee that discussed project adaptations to COVID-19.

In Tajikistan, Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone the **implementers also became allies of public health institutions.** In Kenya, Food for the Hungry (FH), started working with the Ministry of Public Health on training community health workers (CHWs). Each community was allocated a CHW who would be responsible for communicating the main public health recommendations on COVID-19, and the CHWs would then relay community feedback and questions to FH. This information, when necessary, was communicated to public health officials or used to review possible modifications to the programme. CHWs and other community management groups set up in other programmes were also responsible for visit households and actively soliciting feedback. In some cases, **they created solutions to public health issues that were not being adequately solved by overwhelmed health services, for example helping older people experiencing difficulty breathing to access health services.**

Finally, an interesting result related to COVID-19 was that as direct contact between project staff and communities was diminished, **the capacity of the community for problem-solving was improved.** In Kenya, when project teams were able to return to the communities towards the end of 2020, they observed many issues that the local community had been able to solve directly, like the consolidation of support networks for people who had lost most of their income or the consolidation of small “community schools” or day care centres. These problems and solutions were discussed and agreed within the community committees set up by the project and financed by the community with funds generated by the programme. Other implementers also mentioned that community committees or social media parent networks, which were created as feedback mechanisms, were now consistently used by beneficiaries to share problems and discuss solutions, and that these spaces had become stronger during the COVID-19 lockdown when

communities had to rely more on themselves. The feedback platforms thus became an enabler of change and cohesion.

## To what extent were the three specific principles of (1) speed of feedback, (2) open sharing of feedback, and (3) citizen-controlled feedback integrated into feedback practices, and why? What effect did this focus have, if any?

### Speed of Feedback

This principle was interpreted in many different ways by the grantees, which complicated the analysis and meant that responses varied greatly. On one side, it was interpreted as the speed at which data was being collected, and whether that was faster than before the implementation of the pilot. The answer in most cases was no. As most successful feedback mechanisms entailed building on previous monitoring practices, and were thus integrated into project activities, it was hard for the implementers “to tell how much more or less time (was) being spent on them” or how much time it would take for participants’ feedback to be addressed. As mentioned above, interviews showed that time spent by project staff on managing the feedback (including logging, assessing and responding to it) increased significantly, “as more effort (was) necessary”. **The amount of time and effort was nonetheless related to the level of preparation of the staff members, and particularly to the existence of standard operating procedures regarding how to collect, respond or use the feedback.**

This links us to the second interpretation, which sees the principle as a measure of how quickly participants’ concerns were raised and addressed (e.g. speeding up the feedback loop). For this interpretation, results were varied. **One of the partners mentioned that “an emphasis on ensuring that community feedback was collected and being used” was in fact slowing “decision-making processes” and even implementation.** Enhancing the feedback mechanisms thus meant “longer meetings, longer discussions... even though there were better results in the end!” This highlights that speeding up the feedback loop is potentially in conflict with considered responsiveness.

For others, **the speed at which feedback was received, addressed and reported back on, was specifically related to the type of processes and procedures that were established at the outset of the pilot.** When standard operating procedures, FAQs and roles and responsibilities were agreed from the outset, the capacity of teams to quickly respond to feedback was increased, with strong examples provided by Food for the Hungry in Kenya and Health Prom in Tajikistan. These feedback “quick response tools” were mainly useful when responding to feedback that related only to clarifications or doubts from the community, or to feedback/questions commonly requested.

The above also shows **that the speed of closing the feedback loop is highly dependent on the type of issue presented.** If the feedback was related to activities which were already in the workplan or regarding when or how an activity would take place, the request would be responded to immediately. For requests where a third party was responsible (either local government authority or donor), this ultimately depended on these stakeholders’ incentives to respond.

Yet, **despite the differences in the approach and interpretation, one mechanism seemed to produce stronger results in terms of speed of data collection and was seen as a more efficacious mechanism to close the feedback loop: the radio shows.** Radio shows could include project staff speaking live on air to answer queries, and led to a large proportion of the

community making calls or approaching project staff after the shows to present their views and requests. What was the downside of the possibility to reach the wider community with this “mass media tool”? The possibility that some of the listeners were not part of the project’s scope and unable to benefit from it, thus causing confusion or unrealistic expectations. Furthermore, it was difficult for project teams to identify to what extent marginalised groups were participating.

Finally, the partners recognized that by setting up tools to collect more feedback, they were also compelled to inform communities more often about the progress in acting on that feedback. **Even if there was no noticeable change to the speed at which feedback would be resolved, there was a noticeable change in the number of times which the community would request information on the progress, or in the number of times which progress updates were provided. The programme teams also felt more inclined to respond to the information and/or try to find creative solutions to the requests given.**

### Open Sharing

**This principle was the one that caused the most confusion and for some partners concern regarding its implementation.** As mentioned above, some of the tools trialled were largely unsuccessful (e.g., communication boards or online databases). Others, including again the radio show, community committees, parent forums or direct one-to-one communication functioned better, but for these tools the tendency was to share only specific information, and sometimes only with specific individuals or groups rather than publicly.

For example, when feedback was related to specific private issues (e.g. the need for additional psychosocial support during the pandemic), partners did not feel that feedback needed to be logged or shared publicly. However, when the feedback concerned common issues (increasing numbers of families requiring additional psychosocial support), such feedback would then lead to changes which would be rolled out across the programme and the reason for these changes would be publicly reported. Specific details of the individual requests would however not be openly shared.

In general, **partners expressed concerns regarding the limits of the open sharing principle**, particularly when receiving (potentially sensitive) feedback that had been provided during one-on-one interactions, and where communicating the feedback could enable identification of a specific member of the community. **In these cases, open feedback requires better guidelines and/or principles to inform its use and to ensure it does no harm.**

These reflections and analysis point to the need to set up mechanisms to identify who needs to see the feedback, what feedback they need to see, and what the effects of open sharing could be. This also implies that organisations working on creating feedback tools need to think about them from the point of view of the whole feedback cycle. As mentioned above, there are tools to collect feedback, and tools and mechanisms to log, analyse and respond to the data collected. **Perhaps a third set of tools, mechanisms or guidance is needed to address issues about how the information is collated, analysed and shared.**

### Citizen-led feedback

Again, **many of the grantees were slightly confused about the interpretation or implementation of this principle and particularly about how a mechanism could not be citizen-led in practice.** As mentioned by one of the pilot participants, if citizen-led feedback is feedback that comes from the participants themselves, then all tools that attempt to increase community interaction and feedback, are *per se*, citizen-led. As a consequence, **partners requested additional guidance regarding the specific characteristics of citizen-led feedback, or in which cases a feedback tool would not be considered as such.**

Despite the lack of clarity around the concept of “citizen-led” feedback, grantees did implement some feedback mechanisms that were significantly owned by project participants, and which allowed them to raise issues of their choosing at a time of their choosing, community committees being a good example. This does link well with the definition at the start of this paper. Rather than “citizen-led”, more precise language may be necessary (such as “owned and run by the community”) when encouraging feedback mechanisms that empower project participants.

An interpretation that is somewhat linked with the “empowerment” aspect of the definition provided above came from partners in Tajikistan, Sierra Leone and Nepal. They responded to this question by providing examples in which the project’s feedback tools had contributed to increased interactions between the citizens and local authorities/duty bearers/providers of services. For example, in projects already finalised or about to be finalised, they mentioned that community committees/parent forums had continued to run in some cases even after project support ceased to be provided.<sup>11</sup> In others, as already mentioned, the confidence built by the project led to participants directly approaching duty bearers to give them feedback and demand better service provision.

**In all these cases, partners pointed to the feedback pilot as the key contributor in empowering citizens to truly take into their own hands the responsibility to communicate with duty bearers and demand more quality service provision and transparency.**

## Key conclusions and recommendations

As well as the conclusions and recommendations given above, some additional case studies and conclusions are provided:

- The best feedback mechanisms in this pilot were typically the ones which make use of monitoring or delivery tools already in use, and can be combined with a variety of monitoring, evaluation and learning mechanisms. These tend to work better than “innovative” mechanisms because they are more familiar for the participants as well as project teams, and thus require less training and adaptation. Even “innovative tools” that worked better in this pilot were also those that were more familiar to the communities.
- Feedback mechanisms actually gather more information than just “feedback” and can serve to adapt projects to new contexts or be used to understand changing needs or the political economy of the areas in which the project is being implemented.<sup>12</sup>
- COVID-19 has opened an opportunity window for more remote and technologically based tools, but face-to-face engagement is still necessary to guarantee equal access by all beneficiaries, especially in areas where access to internet is irregular and poor. Thus, both in person and remote mechanisms should be woven into feedback platforms rather than being implemented in isolation.
- Feedback tools need to be analysed from the point of view of the whole feedback cycle. Feedback is normally seen only from the point of view of data collection, and thus tools to analyse and determine how the information is logged, analysed and communicated are not

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<sup>11</sup> For example, even after project staff were not actively leading on them or organizing the logistics.

<sup>12</sup> The project in Tajikistan, for example mentioned how feedback mechanisms were combined with network mapping in order to reveal the strengths and weaknesses in the support provided, attitudes and perceptions towards the project, and how to adapt the project and feedback mechanisms to the needs and requirements of some families; thus, increasing the project’s effectiveness.

so often considered in feedback mechanism design. This can lead to problems with the ultimate effectiveness of the tools and can particularly affect the way in which feedback principles are understood and implemented.

- While feedback principles including speed of feedback, openness of feedback, and citizen-led feedback can be applied in specific contexts, they need more precise definitions and clearer guidance before they can be advanced as more general principles for feedback within international development.