BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

There is a growing emphasis among NGOs and donors on ensuring that the voices of beneficiaries are heard. A range of beneficiary feedback mechanisms (BFMs) exist which enable beneficiary perspectives and suggestions to be gathered and used within an M&E system. BFMs are tools designed to enable a continuous cycle of interaction between those receiving and those delivering aid-funded interventions.

Beneficiary feedback may be used in development programmes for improving or evaluating activities, or as a means for the people affected by development interventions to hold implementing organisations to account. In other words, beneficiary feedback can have multiple purposes within an M&E system (see box below).

Purposes of beneficiary feedback

Accountability between donors and recipients	Beneficiary feedback can be used for 'downwards' accountability, i.e. between those providing aid (donors or intermediary organisations) and target groups or populations.
Citizen voice and social accountability	Beneficiary feedback can strengthen the voice and agency of citizens in relation to those providing public services or in positions of power.
Adaptive programming and learning	Feedback can be used throughout the programming cycle to make adjustments and adaptations to activities and services.
Accountability between implementing organisations and donors	Feedback can be used as part of 'upwards' accountability (between implementing organisations and donors), where information from beneficiaries adds to the evidence base. This can be a one-way, extractive process, or involve some form of two-way interaction through, e.g. validation and dissemination of results.

For several years, new emphasis has been placed by donors and NGOs on beneficiary feedback mechanisms (BFMs). These are tools designed to enable a continuous cycle of interaction between those receiving and those delivering aid-funded interventions. This paper focuses primarily on debates surrounding BFMs as a way of strengthening accountability. First, however, it covers some of the broader issues that practitioners will come across in relation to beneficiary feedback.

Unpacking beneficiary feedback and engagement

Practitioners will come across the term **beneficiary engagement**. This relates to a range of ways in which people that development assistance seeks to help can interact with the people and organisations that are trying to help them. Such engagement could include consultation on programme strategy or design, involvement in monitoring exercises or evaluations, or a focused process of interaction through the use of specific beneficiary feedback mechanisms.

The problem with the term 'beneficiaries'

INTRAC often uses the term 'beneficiaries', and has used it throughout the M&E Universe papers. This is because people generally know what it means. However, it is a term that many people who support participatory approaches dislike. This is for two main reasons.

Firstly, it assumes that communities, groups and individuals supported by a project or programme actually benefit from the intervention. This is not always true.

Secondly, and more importantly, it suggests a passive role for people receiving aid, and implies that they need aid from more powerful outside agencies. However, a core principle of participatory approaches is that people have rights to aid and should have the power to actively shape and make decisions about how aid is used.

Unfortunately, there is no consensus on an alternative. Terms in common use include citizens or constituents (particularly in relation to social accountability and addressing power dynamics); end-users and clients (particularly when support focuses on service provision); or affected people / populations / communities. This paper continues to refer to 'beneficiaries' for convenience, whilst acknowledging that the term is not consistent with the spirit of participatory approaches to development.

Engaging with beneficiaries is nothing new in the humanitarian and development sectors, particularly in emergency interventions and in the fields of community and participatory development. As explored in other papers in the M&E Universe, information gathered from beneficiaries can be used throughout the programme cycle for validation, sense-checking to test assumptions, surfacing issues missed by other parts of the monitoring system, identifying red flags, keeping stakeholders engaged through a regular reporting process on project progress, and for enabling learning loops. Feedback can be used to make adaptations to a project based on changing contexts or needs.

Many CSOs have always been committed to beneficiary feedback as the 'right thing to do' (Bond, 2017). However, there is a growing emphasis on listening and being responsive to people affected by aid interventions. This is leading to new expectations from some donors that CSOs and implementing organisations will have robust feedback mechanisms in place in their projects and programmes. For example, DFID funding for CSOs includes requirements around beneficiary feedback.

At the same time, while many CSOs claim or want to be involving beneficiaries in making decisions on things that affect them, they often do not have appropriate or robust systems in place for this to happen. M&E systems often enable collection of data from beneficiaries on their experiences, but do not have processes that allow the organisation to respond to feedback during the lifetime of a project, or to communicate decisions back to the people who initially provided feedback.

Beneficiary feedback mechanisms

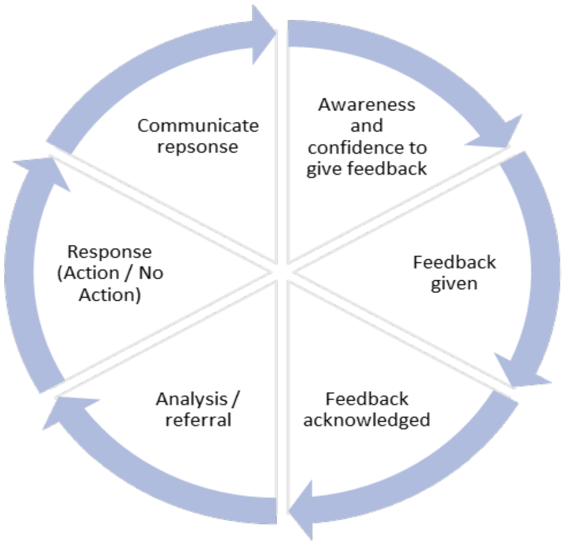
A BFM is a means to strengthen beneficiary engagement, in particular for accountability. A BFM is a context-appropriate process which:

- solicits and listens to, collates and analyses feedback, often through a bespoke tool or range of specific tools or methods;
- triggers a response or action at the required level in the organisation, and/or refers feedback to relevant stakeholders; and
- communicates the response/action taken where relevant back to the original feedback provider, and – if appropriate – the wider beneficiary community (Jean 2013).

The practice of using BFMs is well established in humanitarian interventions, and considerable learning about what works and what doesn't has been carried from humanitarian practice into the wider development sector (Oxfam 2007; Anderson et al. 2012; Bonino et al. 2014a; Bonino et al. 2014b).

Numerous tools can be used by beneficiaries to provide feedback, including suggestion boxes, surveys, mobile phone calls or text messaging (SMS), focus group discussions, one-to-one interviews, community meetings, notice boards, radio call-ins, and hotlines. Mechanisms can allow for closed feedback only (e.g. satisfaction surveys or checklists on specific services provided by a CSO) or for open feedback, i.e. on any issue related to an intervention which the CSO may or may not be able to address. In the case that a CSO receives feedback that falls outside their remit, they should have a system in place to refer the feedback onwards to someone who is in a position to deal with the issue (known as **referral pathways**).

Central to the concept of a BFM is the **feedback loop.** The diagram above, based on World Vision et. al. (2016), depicts the feedback loop used in a BFM pilot project (see



also case study). A first step is to ensure that the target population knows how to give feedback, and is confident to do so. This may involve overcoming any fear about giving negative feedback. Trust built up from the responsiveness of those who receive and act on the feedback should in turn generate the ongoing supply of feedback. A feedback loop can be considered functional when feedback is received, handled, acted upon and responded to. It is truly closed when the person who gave the feedback knows what has happened as a result.

Case study: Piloting BFMs

Between 2013 and 2016 DFID funded a pilot (implemented by World Vision, INTRAC, Social Impact Lab and the CDA Collaborative) to design and test different approaches to gathering and responding to feedback from population groups targeted by aid-funded interventions. The purpose was to increase the voice and influence of beneficiaries on the aid programme. Bespoke beneficiary feedback mechanisms were attached to seven existing DFID-funded maternal and child health projects run by CSOs in six countries. Different mechanisms were designed and tested including text messages, voice messages, phone call-backs, suggestion boxes, focus group discussions, surveys, and community meetings. Resources provided to the existing projects to support the BFMs included: community feedback officers; materials; systems and training; advisory support and external M&E support.

The premise – or theory of change – was that a series of feedback loops would be created between the beneficiaries (i.e. people affected directly or indirectly by the interventions), service providers, programme decision-makers, and policy-makers in DFID.

In practice a lot of feedback received at the frontline was dealt with at the point of contact or field implementation level. Some feedback was referred onwards to state actors as it related to issues outside the control of the implementing organisations. Some issues were referred upwards to programme managers. In the lifetime of the pilot very little feedback went much further up the chain (e.g. to the INGO headquarters, the fund manager, or to DFID).

Source: World Vision et al. 'Using beneficiary feedback to improve development programmes: finding from a multi-country pilot', July 2016

A well-designed BFM will be linked to internal M&E and learning processes, and will take account of the following:

- Context and political analysis to understand barriers and enablers to beneficiary voice, who has the power to give feedback and who does not, and who has the power to respond to feedback.
- Negotiation with those who have power to act on feedback, including beyond the sphere of direct influence of the project, such as local authorities and service providers. Clear referral pathways for feedback within an organisation and with external actors are therefore important.
- Inclusion of beneficiaries in design and delivery, which will ensure that the mechanisms take account of cultural constraints, language barriers, inclusion, and power dynamics. Multiple channels and types of mechanism are often required in a given context to ensure access for all prospective beneficiaries.
- Sensitization and awareness-raising so that beneficiaries know why they are being asked to give feedback and how to do so, and that they should not be prohibited from giving feedback by fear of reprisal either by project implementers, funders or state authorities.
- Sensitivity to very vulnerable, hidden or mobile groups (such as migrants), minimising demands on their time and ensuring that they benefit from the process (see IFRC and Ground Truth Solutions, 2018).
- Delegation of responsibility, as well as investment in capacity and skills of people on the frontline to collect, log, analyse, make decisions, refer, act and respond to feedback (see also IRC 2018). Staff and volunteers also need to know what to do with negative and unexpected feedback.
- The importance of leadership in resourcing and modelling best practice in feedback processes. Decision-makers need to be able to access and use feedback in a timely manner, with incentives and flexibility to adapt and not just to stay on a given course.

Issues with BFMs

Supply and demand: practitioners should ask themselves what is driving the decision to develop BFMs. Is it to respond to beneficiary demands, to fulfil commitments to a rights-based approach, to deliver on CSO goals, to meet donor requirements, or a combination of these? Is there a trade-off to address between upwards and downwards accountability? Feedback mechanisms require sustained investment and so they need to be connected to organisational culture and a commitment to listening to and including beneficiaries in decision-making processes. Tools alone are not enough (Bond, 2017).

Building up trust: beneficiaries often need to be supported initially to build up the confidence to give feedback. This might also require both beneficiaries and other stakeholders overcoming suspicions about the purpose of beneficiary feedback and particularly fears about giving negative feedback. Practitioners therefore need to reflect on assumptions about the extent to which different actors are open to giving and hearing feedback. Moreover, beneficiaries need to be confident that their issues are being addressed even if the feedback is not relevant to the person or organisation receiving it. In this case, providing information to beneficiaries on referral pathways can help to reinforce trust.

A more recent addition to debates on BFMs relates to their value for trust-building, transparency and safeguarding. There is a strong correlation between Bond's Eight Principles for building trust through feedback (see box below) and the points made above about best practice in BFM design.

Principles for building trust through feedback

To ensure that accountability mechanisms are accessible, meaningful and effective they should:

1. be context-specific, and based on consultation with users
2. be inclusive and accessible
3. be empowering
4. be consistently closing the loop with a commitment to transparency and accountability
5. enable collective responsibility for giving voice to those without power
6. be impartial
7. do no harm
8. be appropriately resourced

Source: Bond 2018

***Power and empowerment**:* BFMs often seek to empower beneficiaries. However, they will only deliver on this goal if leaders face up to the contradictions in the aid system which make responsiveness to feedback hard in practice. In particular they have to get the balance right between being flexible, humble and creative to meet the needs of the poor and vulnerable, and meeting the demands of a system that is often risk-averse and driven by demand for results. Those designing and implementing BFMs need to consider whether they are really listening and responding to beneficiaries in a language and a way that tackles power imbalances right through the aid 'chain'.

Investment: Good feedback processes are not cheap, especially if CSOs are serious about closing the feedback loop. CSOs need to consider depth as well as breadth in designing BFMs, balancing reach across an area or population group with capacity to handle the feedback and respond. In particular there needs to be investment in the skills of frontline workers and staff who are at the point of contact between 'beneficiary' and 'provider'.

Anonymity versus collective feedback: BFMs can be confidential and anonymous (e.g. suggestion boxes or individual calls or surveys) or collective (e.g. in focus group discussions or community meetings). There are advantages and disadvantages with all mechanisms that need to be considered. Anonymity may encourage feedback on sensitive issues, but it can be harder to close the loop. Collective feedback may support those who are not confident to raise their voice alongside others and enhance a sense of collective agency.

Accepting 'failure': practitioners and donors need to ensure that project or programme adaptations in response to beneficiary feedback are viewed as a positive action, and not interpreted as a sign of poor planning, programme design flaws, or failures on the part of the implementing organisations.

Evaluating BFMs: The list above on good practice in BFMs provides a basis for what practitioners might look for when assessing the quality, effectiveness and impact of a beneficiary feedback mechanism (see case study below), as well as evidence of the closing of feedback loops and use of feedback (IRC 2018). Evaluating beneficiary feedback in a large programme or complex organisation across multiple countries, contexts and communities is likely to throw up challenges for M&E systems, particularly if there is a need for systematic reporting or aggregating of results.

Weighing up the evidence: a final key issue to consider is what forms of evidence drive decision-making, and what will happen if feedback indicates that a project should go in a very different direction. How much credibility is given to feedback from beneficiaries, and to what extent is data from a BFM 'crowded out' by other sources of information? In assessing feedback, do many voices count more than one voice? There may be instances where one 'red flag' should be enough to trigger action. For example, suppose that a health programme receives feedback from someone that health information sessions are not delivered at the right time. In this instance, staff may wish to collect more data or verify this claim against other M&E data before taking action. On the other hand, if someone reported that staff demand money for administering a free service at a particular clinic, then it may be appropriate to take immediate action.

> *"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." (Bond, 2017)*

Case study: monitoring and evaluating feedback mechanisms

The core of the DFID BFM pilot programme outlined in the case study box above was to design and test different approaches to gathering and responding to feedback. A monitoring system was designed to accompany the project. The objectives of the monitoring system were to:

1. Assess whether the three BFM approaches were being implemented as planned, considering design and beneficiary voice in the process as well as relevance to context, access and the use of multiple mechanisms to expand access, use of the BFMs, and costs. It also sought to assess how BFMs address issues like power, literacy, gender, and inclusion.
2. Assess the information flow between beneficiaries, project implementers, and the donor.
3. Review the effectiveness and efficiency of the BFM approaches in relation to how they affected the ability of the projects to make positive changes in peoples' lives. This included reviewing: adaptations made to the BFMs, as well as adaptations to projects based on feedback; the decision-making process for responding; a cost-benefit analysis; less tangible consequences such as empowerment and confidence to claim entitlements; how organisations handled feedback and the referral process; and impact on project outcomes including beyond log-frame indicators.
4. Provide learning for projects and stakeholders supporting the pilot to help them to adapt project activities and improve subsequent decision-making. This highlighted the need for flexibility in programming and budgeting, and the importance of relationships.

A team of local consultants gathered data at baseline, mid-term and end-point against key lines of enquiry and indicators. INTRAC then conducted an analysis and synthesis across the seven pilots. The methods used included interviews, surveys, focus groups, analysis of feedback management, databases and responses.

Based on the monitoring and evaluation activities, the value of the BFMs within this pilot can be summarised as follows:

- **For beneficiaries** – most were satisfied and engaged. There were indications that BFMs were valued by beneficiaries as platforms for exercising voice, and that BFMs have supported beneficiaries to claim their entitlements.
- **For project implementers** – most valued the BFM. There were indications that adaptations improve the relevance and effectiveness of programmes, although this was not tested. There were also early indications that the implementing CSOs were considering how to sustain the BFMs and scale up the use of beneficiary feedback within their programmes.
- **For donors** – it is hard to say what value they gained from the BFMs. The monitoring system was not able to evaluate the impact of the BFM pilots on outcomes of the overarching programme to which the pilot was attached.

Source: World Vision et al. 'Using beneficiary feedback to improve development programmes: finding from a multi-country pilot', July 2016

Summary

Beneficiary feedback is going up the agenda for NGOs and donors alike, in response to internal and external demands to listen and be responsive to people and communities affected by aid interventions.

There are many methods and tools, evidence and knowledge available to help with the design of functioning feedback loops, including in difficult development and humanitarian contexts.

However, those designing, developing, and assessing beneficiary feedback need to have a clear vision of the purpose of the feedback in relation to organisational goals in order to ensure that BFMs are well-designed and implemented.

Further reading and resources

www.feedbackmechanisms.org houses all the resources produced by the Beneficiary Feedback Pilot project which provides the case study for this paper. The CDA Collaborative and Keystone Accountability offer a variety of resources on tools for accountability in humanitarian and development contexts, including on beneficiary feedback. The Resilient Roots project, run by Accountable Now and CIVICUS, has produced a number of blogs posts and tools on feedback loops.

Two other papers in the M&E Universe that deal with related topics are the papers on Accountability and Participatory M&E. These can be accessed by clicking on the links below.

Accountability

Participatory M&E

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