

Power imbalances

In negotiating the design and implementation of a project, community members can all too often be at an unfair disadvantage to international organizations and partners, no matter how well intentioned, because of the imbalance in who controls and administers aid resources. Development workers must be accountable not only to donors but also to the communities they serve, a balance that can be challenging in practice.

How can organizations such as Catholic Relief Services ensure that programs give due voice to the people they seek to assist?

Feedback mechanisms for development programs

Emergency relief programs commonly use feedback and response mechanisms (also known as complaint mechanisms) to capture community perceptions on how programs are being implemented. This allows community members the opportunity to provide their views, both positive and negative, about all aspects of the assistance they receive, so those delivering services can better understand and respond to felt needs.



CRS used help desks (pictured here), hotlines, focus group sessions, community meetings and bulletin boards to collect feedback and communicate with community members. *Yvonne Madondo (Makunde)/CRS*



CRS used a number of feedback mechanisms, including suggestion boxes, which were locked to ensure confidentiality. *Yvonne Madondo (Makunde)/CRS*

Much work around this topic has taken place in the humanitarian arena. The international community is now realizing the importance of incorporating feedback mechanisms in development programs as well. At CRS, we are eager to share what we've learned about using feedback mechanisms in different development contexts. This fact sheet describes one example from Zimbabwe.

Suggestion boxes, help desks, hotlines and meetings

In Zimbabwe, CRS and consortium partners recently employed feedback mechanisms in a \$58 million project to improve food security and agricultural livelihoods.

Staff documented and reviewed each response that they received, with the aid of trustworthy, trained volunteers who were recommended by community members. Staff answered questions, replied to suggestions and addressed complaints in confidential, context-appropriate ways—in person, over the phone, during focus group sessions, during community meetings and through bulletin boards. When staff or partners were unable to satisfy particular requests, they referred the requests to their supervisors for action.

At the end of each month, CRS and partners reported on the range of comments that the program had received. This helped the consortium to identify the most important issues. It also provided a way for staff to learn from each other's work and share emerging adapted practices.

Results

Feedback from the community allowed the project to make a number of important changes, including the following:

- The project enlisted the help of bulldozers when participants raised concerns about working without heavy machinery.
- In response to concerns about safety and accessibility, the project ensured that every food distribution point was no farther than 7 kilometers (4.3 miles) from the target community's homes, per the recommended SPHERE standard.
- When mothers with small children cited their need for child care services at project sites, the program arranged for trusted elderly community members to look after the children during working hours, along with other lighter duties.

Lessons learned

- **Start early:** Feedback and response mechanisms should be considered early, beginning with the project planning phase.
- **Allocate funds:** Feedback and response mechanisms require dedicated funding for staffing, training and awareness-raising.

- **Increase ownership:** Communities are more receptive to programs when their contributions are actively sought through formal systems.
- **Get buy-in from leadership:** Support from management is crucial to success in implementing an effective accountability system.
- **Respond to every issue:** This is critical. Feedback systems are only effective when staff and management show a commitment to responding to *all* issues raised by community members.
- **Track trends:** This helps management to identify critical areas to improve the overall implementation strategy.

NAME OF THE PROGRAM

Promoting Recovery in Zimbabwe (PRIZE)

YEARS

2010–2013

LOCATION

Zimbabwe

FUNDING

\$58 million from Food for Peace, Development Food Assistance Program

PEOPLE THE PROGRAM TARGETED

112,000 chronically food-insecure households in eight districts

202,200 individuals in the Vulnerable Group Feeding emergency program

89,100 households via the Food for Assets projects

Ten steps for setting up feedback and response mechanisms

1. Get support from management.
2. Review your current practices for handling feedback.
3. Consult communities on their preferred methods for providing feedback.
4. Design a robust system for responding to feedback, and determine what resources you need.
5. Introduce the system to staff.
6. Train partners and community volunteers on how to use the system.
7. Give the communities information about the system.
8. Use the system to collect and respond to feedback.
9. Use this information to adapt the program's planned interventions.
10. Document lessons learned and emerging adapted practices to continually share knowledge and improve.