

# LEARNING FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY CHALLENGE FUND: BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK MECHANISMS



## KEY INSIGHTS

Listening to and acting on feedback from the communities contributes to the empowerment of beneficiaries. By nature, challenge funds engage smaller organisations and shift decision making closer to target beneficiaries. The CSCF portfolio of projects has over the life of the fund provided interesting insights and learning on listening to and including beneficiaries in implementation and monitoring that can be applicable to other challenge funds.

- 1 Getting the right people and the right channels facilitates more insightful and useful feedback.
- 2 More frequent feedback can produce more useful results and can allow for more timely action within the life of a project.
- 3 Two-way channels of communication are essential. By responding to beneficiaries and closing the feedback loop (ensuring the project responds to feedback), confidence can be built and further insights gained.
- 4 Managing beneficiary expectations helps build trust and ensure their needs are met.

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## ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL: KEY LESSONS

### Choosing the right people and channels: Formal and informal mechanisms

Beneficiary feedback involves different layers of stakeholders. Where **formal channels** may fit the purpose for some, for others these may be restrictive and more **informal channels** are more appropriate.

Where anonymity is key, formal mechanisms such as **suggestion boxes** and **periodic surveys** can allow projects to hear views that are not heard in open meetings and discussions. In contrast, **focus**

The **CIVIL SOCIETY CHALLENGE FUND (CSCF)** was a demand-led fund which aimed to enable poor and marginalised people to have a voice on issues that affect them and to be included in local and national decision making forums. Running from 2000 to 2015, it supported 526 projects in Africa, Asia, the Americas and the Middle East, each with a grant of up to £500,000 and running for 3 to 5 years.

This learning brief is one of six, prepared upon completion of the CSCF, focusing on key areas of best practice within the fund. These briefs aim to share learning with practitioners and civil society learning networks, and help inform future fund management in DFID and beyond.

### **CSCF AND BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK MACHANISMS**

In August 2012, the CSCF Fund Manager conducted a survey with grant holders to understand the extent beneficiary feedback mechanisms were being used and applied. Of the 69 projects that responded, all but one said they collect beneficiary feedback aimed at improving project design and implementation. Annual reports and final project evaluations have provided the Fund Manager with a wealth of inputs, which it has been able to gather for DFID, on assurance that project beneficiaries are able to comment on project performance and that their views are considered by grant holders.

**groups and community meetings** address and generate feedback systematically, with the possibility for on the spot discussions and conversations to expand on the issues and gain a deeper understanding. Effective mechanisms such as **community radio programmes** can not only act as an informative tool but can receive feedback on the type of content coverage that is of more priority and interest to the beneficiaries and listeners. **Listener phone-ins** can also generate personal feedback and facilitate discussion.

Sensitive topics can be best communicated through informal mechanisms, such as **one-to-one discussions**. This provides a safe and secure space where discussions on sensitive issues, such as abuse and violence, can take place in confidence. This does, however, require high levels of capacity amongst staff, and may require training.

### **Higher frequency of feedback produces greater results**

CSCF projects have been collecting beneficiary feedback at least once a year, as well as during mid-term and final evaluation processes. While this may be the minimum, to ensure beneficiaries and project stakeholders are engaging by providing their feedback, projects have also been seeking beneficiary feedback through monthly and quarterly monitoring visits where monitoring and evaluation staff

engage with communities, leaders, focus groups and individuals. A large number of projects have also recognised the need to have in place mechanisms that accommodate a need for high frequency feedback, including ad hoc feedback and complaints. This is particularly crucial for projects which address critical issues such as gender based violence, child abuse and HIV/AIDS.

Where the organisation and project are new to the region or area, there is a need for trust- and relationship-building to demonstrate commitment to respond to feedback. This needs to be built throughout the project by engaging with beneficiaries and communities on a more frequent basis.

### **Closing the feedback loop**

Feedback mechanisms perform best when a **two-way channel** of communication is in place. Seeking feedback from beneficiaries on satisfaction levels about project services and how to improve them is only half the story.

Closing the feedback loop requires listening and responding to the feedback received from beneficiaries. Within CSCF projects, simple but effective changes that have come directly from the beneficiaries have increased their confidence and trust and motivated their further engagement (as detailed in Letter Link Boxes). This can encourage others to also participate and voice their

### **CASE STUDY 1. LOCAL COMMUNICATORS**

A CSCF project empowering marginalised coastal communities in Ecuador engaged local teenagers as local communicators to help carry out annual representative surveys which generated details about peoples' views on



project activities and their needs. With minimum external consultancy and project team supervision, such local communicators have been able to maintain continuous contact with local stakeholders and act as two-way informants.

feedback. This not only increases a sense of ownership among the communities but also strengthens chances of sustainability of results. Typically, beneficiaries are linked to project teams only through their leaders and groups. A two-way feedback system strengthens this

## CASE STUDY 2. BUILDING TRUST

Nature Kenya has worked in the Tana River Delta region for over seven years and is involved in empowering the poor to achieve local control and sustainable management of the natural resources. In partnership with RPSB, Nature Kenya has developed strong relationships and built trust among influential actors, such as village facilitators, project extension officers, government staff and elders.

Communities are able to feedback through meetings and monitoring reports collected by village facilitators, staff and government officers. One such feedback related to dissatisfaction of the pastoralists where they stated that Nature Kenya had employed one staff member from among farmers and none from the pastoralists. This resulted in engaging an extension officer that came from the pastoralist communities.

linkage and ensures information- and knowledge-sharing throughout. Creating local facilitator or communicator roles from within the communities and engaging them in the processes has been an effective way to address this in many CSCF projects.

## Challenges and barriers

Beneficiary feedback is extremely useful for ensuring that the needs of vulnerable people are met. It is important to consider the challenges faced by projects, particularly in funding, inclusion and managing expectations.

**Funding:** Feedback received from beneficiaries may involve demands and suggestions such as geographical expansion, increased population coverage and increased service delivery such as additional nutritional support and treatment. This is normally not possible with the existing project funds. It is crucial for project teams and partners not to raise expectations and to communicate reasons why a particular feedback may not be possible to act upon.

**Inclusion:** When working in communities that for example include other ethnic groups, it is important that project staff effectively manage and clarify differences in languages and culture. This will require dialogue and an understanding of differences. Use of pictorial forms of communication help avoid language barriers.



## FORMAL AND INFORMAL FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

Addressing the sensitive issue of gender equality and food security in Mushie, Democratic Republic of Congo, has meant that both formal and informal feedback collection mechanisms have been put in place.

Formal level feedback has been collected through official consultation of beneficiary representatives in group meetings, where topics to be discussed have been provided ahead of the meeting. Further feedback has been generated through regular monitoring via focus groups or individual interviews.

At informal level, beneficiaries can drop in to the project partner's office in Mushie city, where they are able to give private, one-to-one feedback or raise specific concerns and challenges. Providing internet access in a separate room has meant beneficiaries or local stakeholders have visited frequently.





Photo (front cover)

TB Alert, Improved access to TB services for underserved communities in Andhra Pradesh

**Photos (in order)**

Fauna and Flora International (FFI), Empowering marginalised coastal communities in Ecuador

ACORD International, Promoting gender equality and food security in Mushie (DRC)

RSPB, Empowering the poor to achieve local control and sustainable management of the natural resources of the Tana River Delta in Kenya

ChildHope UK/ANPPCAN, Reducing violence against children in Uganda

**This report was prepared by Triple Line Consulting in joint venture with Crown Agents. Any views within are not necessarily held by DFID.**



The CSCF has been managed by Triple Line and Crown Agents from 2010-2015.

This paper looks at how CSCF projects collected and responded to beneficiary feedback.

**CASE STUDY 3. LETTER LINK BOXES**

Suggestion boxes can be powerful feedback mechanisms, particularly if their purposes are clearly defined and communicated to ensure relevant feedback is generated.

'Letter Link Boxes' were introduced in schools covered by a CSCF project addressing the reduction of violence amongst children in schools in Uganda. These boxes enabled children to give feedback to project staff on how to improve services provided. In addition, on monthly visits to the schools, the project asked children to evaluate the performance of the letter link boxes and what they would want changed.

Letter Link Boxes allow children to express concern confidentially. One example of the issues raised by the children in one school, was their request that the Head Teacher not be the one to open the boxes and they instead be opened by senior male and female teachers. The children have also been asked to respond on how project staff can improve the services provided.

**Beyond project scope:** Feedback may also be unrelated and irrelevant to the project's objectives and scope, and issues raised may not be able to be actioned by the project. Project staff should relay the information gained to the appropriate authorities or organisation and communicate to the beneficiaries that the issue is beyond their control and has been shared with decision-makers.

**Conclusion**

Feedback can be a dynamic mechanism for linking beneficiaries to decision makers, and a way to create knowledge, awareness and capacity for small organisations. While it is an integral part of annual reviews, as well as mid-term and final evaluations, many organisations have in place a flow of information from beneficiaries throughout the project through their monitoring and evaluation processes.

To capture and assess the extent and nature of collecting feedback from beneficiaries within the CSCF portfolio, the Fund Manager facilitated knowledge sharing of beneficiary feedback mechanisms through annual reporting requirements, as well as through project visits. Inputs from grant holders have generated interesting learning on methods, best practice and challenges, with lessons and considerations that are useful for all projects.