HUMANITARIAN ACADEMY · HUMANITAIRES JOBS

Mini MBA Programmes and MEAL: design, manage and prove impact

Course handout · Week 8 : Accountability to affected people: participation, complaints and feedback

A programme of exactly 3 months (12 weeks, 144 hours) to design, manage and evaluate humanitarian programmes: needs assessment and severity, results chain and indicators, targeting and cash transfers, planning and budget, MEAL plan and data quality, sampling, analysis, accountability, evaluation, impact measurement, value for money and adaptive management. Corrected numerical exercises, three monthly exams with case studies, and a verifiable diploma from the Humanitarian Academy.

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Week 8 : Accountability to affected people: participation, complaints and feedback

Objectives

- Translate the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) into concrete, measurable practices within a programme.
- Design and manage a complaints and feedback mechanism that is accessible, safe and closes the loop.
- Organise genuine participation of people and transparent information, including on difficult decisions.

What being accountable to people means

Accountability to affected people (AAP) is the commitment to use one's power responsibly: taking people's views into account, reporting to them and answering to them for one's actions. It does not replace accountability to donors; it complements it, and the two are often in tension (a donor wants numbers, people want to be heard).

The **Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability** (CHS), revised in 2024, sets out nine commitments to people and communities. In essence: aid that respects their rights and their participation, is accessible in time, relevant, strengthens their capacities and does no harm, with complaints handled safely, coordinated aid, an organisation that learns, competent and well-managed staff, and resources used responsibly.

For each commitment, an organisation can ask itself three questions: what do we actually do? how do we know? what do people themselves say? The most telling indicators come from people: "Do you think the aid meets your most important needs?", "Do you know how to make a complaint?", "Do you feel treated with respect?".

> Accountability is judged by what changes. A programme that consults without ever changing anything teaches people that their opinion does not count, and the next round of participation will be weaker.

Designing a complaints and feedback mechanism

A **complaints and feedback mechanism** (CFM or FCRM) receives, records, processes and responds to all communications from people: questions, suggestions, simple complaints, sensitive complaints. Its design starts with consultation: which channels do people use and whom do they trust? Women, children, older people and people with disabilities do not give the same answers.

Several channels complement each other: a free hotline, messaging, suggestion boxes (for anonymity, if they are opened by someone independent of the distribution team), help desks

and reception desks at distributions, home visits for people who cannot travel, community committees, and feedback collected during monitoring.

The mechanism defines written **categories** and **timeframes**. For example: request for information, response within 3 days; programme complaint (not registered, wrong amount), response within 7 days; sensitive complaint (fraud, abuse, sexual exploitation, security), referral within 24 hours to the designated person, through a separate confidential channel.

The non-negotiable principles: **confidentiality**, **safety** of people who complain (no retaliation), **accessibility** (languages, illiteracy, disability), **free of charge**, and **separation** between those who handle complaints and those who are the subject of them.

Closing the loop and measuring performance

"Closing the loop" means that every person receives a response, even when the answer is no, and that feedback trends inform decisions. Most mechanisms collect, but many do not respond.

Useful performance indicators:

- Number of feedback items received per month and per 1,000 people assisted, by channel, by sex and age.
- Share of feedback closed within the planned timeframe.
- Share of people satisfied with the response (checked by a call-back on a sample).
- Share of people who know at least one channel (monitoring survey).
- Number of programme changes resulting from feedback during the quarter.

Example. 340 feedback items in one month for 17,000 people: 20 per 1,000. 289 closed within the timeframe: 85%. Compared with a previous month of 2 feedback items per 1,000, this is not a deterioration: it is often a sign that the mechanism is finally known and that people trust it.

> A mechanism that receives very few complaints is rarely the sign of a perfect programme: it is almost always the sign of a mechanism that is unknown, inaccessible or not trusted.

Sensitive complaints and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse

Complaints of **sexual exploitation and abuse** (SEA) by humanitarian staff follow a strict channel, based on the IASC six core principles: SEA constitutes gross misconduct and grounds for termination; any sexual activity with a child (under 18) is prohibited regardless of the local age of consent; exchanging money, employment, goods or services for sex is prohibited; sexual relationships with beneficiaries are strongly discouraged because they are based on unequal power dynamics; staff must report any concern; and managers must create an environment that prevents SEA.

In the mechanism, this means: anyone who receives an allegation passes it on **immediately** to the designated focal point, without investigating it themselves; the **survivor** is referred to assistance (medical care, psychosocial support, protection, legal aid) according to their wishes;

the person implicated is removed from contact with beneficiaries during the investigation; information is shared strictly on a need-to-know basis; the donor is informed in accordance with the contract.

A **survivor-centred** approach respects four principles: safety, confidentiality, respect for choices, non-discrimination. The person is never confronted with the alleged perpetrator, and is not asked to repeat their testimony.

Participation and information

Participation ranges from information to shared decision-making. The classic ladder distinguishes: informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, and transferring the decision. Most humanitarian programmes remain at the level of consultation; aiming higher on certain decisions (choice of sites, targeting criteria, kit composition, schedule) improves relevance and acceptance.

Community committees are useful but fragile: they often reproduce existing power relations. Attention is paid to their composition (women, young people, people with disabilities, minorities), a written mandate is set, and they are not left alone to select beneficiaries without oversight.

Information is a form of aid: people have the right to know who the organisation is, what it does, for whom, according to which criteria, for how long, how to complain, and that aid is free. Appropriate languages and formats are used (radio, voice messages, illustrated posters, separate meetings for women).

Difficult decisions (ration cuts, end of a programme, change of targeting) must be announced early, explained honestly and accompanied: referral to other services, a transition period. Announcing a cut on the day of the distribution is an accountability failure that also creates security risks for staff.

Data protection and integration into the programme cycle

Feedback and complaints contain **personal data**, sometimes highly sensitive. Minimum rules: access limited to those who handle cases; separation of identifying data from content for analysis; anonymisation in reports; a defined retention period; no sharing with authorities or third parties without a clear basis and without an assessment of the risks to the people concerned.

Accountability must be integrated into every stage of the programme cycle, and budgeted:

- **Assessment**: ask people about their priorities and preferred channels.
- **Design**: targeting criteria explained, complaints mechanism planned, budget line (staff, hotline, information materials).
- **Implementation**: information, feedback handled, adjustments.
- **Monitoring**: accountability indicators in the dashboard.
- **Evaluation and learning**: people themselves judge the relevance and quality of the aid.

At collective level, common mechanisms (inter-agency information lines) reduce confusion for people, who often do not know the names of organisations. They require clear agreements on data sharing and case referral.

Exercise: fixing a complaints mechanism

Situation. A programme for 24,000 people. In six months, 31 feedback items were received, all through the suggestion box installed in the organisation's office and opened by the site manager; 12 received a response. A monitoring survey shows that 22% of people know a way to complain (13% of women, 31% of men). An enumerator reports a rumour that a distributor is asking women for sexual favours in exchange for registration.

Task. 1) Calculate the feedback rate per 1,000 people and the response rate. 2) Identify the four main problems. 3) What do you do within 24 hours about the rumour? 4) Propose three monitoring indicators.

Answer. 31 feedback items for 24,000 people: 1.3 per 1,000 in six months, extremely low. Response rate: 12 / 31 = 39%. Problems: a single channel, not very accessible and located in the office; box opened by a person who may be implicated (no independence); low awareness, especially among women; loop not closed. Within 24 hours: pass the rumour on to the PSEA focal point without investigating yourself, arrange the precautionary removal of the distributor from registration activities, plan assistance for any survivor identified, inform management and the donor according to procedures. Indicators: feedback per 1,000 people by sex and channel; share closed within the timeframe; share of people, by sex, who know at least one channel.

Key takeaways

- The CHS sets out nine commitments; the best indicators come from what people say.
- A feedback mechanism has several channels chosen with people, written timeframes and a separate sensitive channel.
- Closing the loop: every feedback item receives a response and trends change the programme.
- Few complaints often signal a mechanism that is unknown or not trusted, not a perfect programme.
- SEA allegation: immediate referral to the focal point, survivor-centred assistance, no improvised investigation.

Quiz

1. A mechanism receives 3 complaints in six months for 20,000 people assisted. The most likely interpretation:
   A. The programme is excellent
   B. The mechanism is unknown, inaccessible or not trusted
   C. People have nothing to say
   D. The mechanism should be scrapped
2. A staff member receives an allegation of sexual exploitation against a colleague. They must:
   A. Question the colleague themselves
   B. Pass it on immediately to the designated focal point, without investigating themselves
   C. Wait until they have evidence
   D. Raise it at a team meeting
3. According to the IASC principles, any sexual activity with a person under 18 is prohibited:
   A. Only if the local age of consent is 18
   B. Regardless of the local age of consent
   C. Only for international staff
   D. Only during working hours
4. Who should not open a complaints box?
   A. An independent accountability officer
   B. The head of the distribution team whose activities are the subject of complaints
   C. A pair including a woman
   D. A member of the MEAL team
5. A ration cut has been decided. The practice consistent with accountability is:
   A. Announce it on the day of the distribution
   B. Announce it early, explain it honestly, and refer people to other services during a transition
   C. Not announce it
   D. Let the authorities announce it

Quiz answers : 1. B · 2. B · 3. B · 4. B · 5. B