

## Tearfund North Kenya Programme Increasing levels of participation – the role of the Beneficiary Reference Groups

In August 2007 Monica Blagescu and Emily Rogers, from the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) roving field team, worked alongside Tearfund to conduct an accountability assessment of their programme in North Kenya. Over the course of ten days the field team visited four different project sites, spoke with staff and local people, made observations, and reviewed project documentation. This case study reflects the practice that was documented by HAP during this visit, and has been approved by Tearfund for wider dissemination.

### North Kenya programme background

The prolonged drought affecting the Horn of Africa has threatened the lives of 11 million people in the region, 3 million of who live in Kenya. The impact was most severe in pastoral areas of Northern Kenya where malnutrition levels exceeded emergency thresholds and livestock losses of up to 70% were reported, resulting in mass migration of pastoralists in search of water, pasture and jobs.

Tearfund responded to the drought in Northern Kenya, Marsabit District, by firstly implementing an emergency therapeutic and supplementary feeding nutrition programme (June '06 to April '07). Later, two more projects – Livelihoods and Food Security, and Water and Sanitation (April to October '07) were launched to focus on longer-term needs of the targeted communities. The former focused on restocking of camels in ten communities, vegetable garden and support to women groups in two communities, while the water and sanitation project focused on the construction of four earth dams through cash for work, of which three have been completed.

### The importance of community participation

Effective participation empowers communities by enabling them to influence decisions that will affect their lives. The difference in the needs identified by men and women groups in the Northern Kenya communities where Tearfund was working highlights the importance of different approaches for different groups during the needs-assessment process; the women, for example tended to prioritise family and domestic needs, while men were more concerned about the needs of their livestock.

### The need for the Beneficiary Reference Groups (BRGs)

Throughout Tearfund's North Kenya programme, communities were involved in decision-making in a number of different ways, and at different stages of the project cycle. For example, at the onset of each project, public meetings were conducted; during the implementation of the nutrition programme, volunteers from the community were used in health promotion activities; and local reference groups were established to strengthen communication between Tearfund and communities in the water and livestock projects.

In many areas, however, low levels of civic competence among villagers inhibit freedom of speech and there is often a reluctance to speak out, and a tendency to agree with



powerful figures (local leaders, elders, etc) during meetings. Additionally, as in many programmes, the local committees (e.g. the community livestock committees) provided both technical support to the project and were closely involved in the identification of beneficiaries and the distribution of resources. The additional responsibility given to these individuals risks potential conflicts of interest and abuse of power, resulting in beneficiaries identified based on personal connections or clan links rather than based on needs. To address both of these concerns, to enhance beneficiary involvement and to develop a mechanism for receiving complaints and feedback, the Beneficiary Reference Groups (BRGs) were established in May 2007 in each of the ten communities where Tearfund was working. The BRGs were to be the 'eyes' of the community receiving and processing queries, feedback and concerns from the committees and their community, and working in close consultation with Tearfund staff so that pending issues were swiftly addressed. In particular, the BRGs were able to support Tearfund with hearing the views of the more vulnerable groups, who may have been absent or unable to voice their opinions during public meetings.

### **Box 1: Beneficiary Reference Group Terms of Reference**

#### Main roles and responsibilities:

1. Meet at least once a month.
2. Collect and compile verbal complaints and feedback from beneficiaries.
3. Create awareness on the roles and responsibilities of Tearfund to the beneficiaries.
4. Facilitate community participation in programme implementation.
5. Create awareness on accountability.
6. Update Beneficiary Accountability Officer on progress and any new developments.

#### Selection criteria for BRG members:

1. Respected members of the community.
2. Ability to read and understand English and/or Kiswahili languages<sup>1</sup>.
3. Interest and experience in community work.
4. Should NOT be in any Tearfund committee.
5. Be willing to work as volunteers.
6. Willing to attend a one-day induction training on Accountability.
7. Represent different sectors of the community (i.e. youth, women, elders, and church).

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<sup>1</sup> This was felt to be important for ease of regular communication and trainings with Tearfund staff.

### **Establishing the BRGs**

Details on programmatic areas of work and issues of accountability were first introduced in each of the ten villages through two target community meetings, involving community leaders. During a third meeting, the Beneficiary Accountability Officer introduced the concept and purpose of a Beneficiary Reference Group (BRG), and proposed the criteria for selecting individuals for this group. During this meeting, at the suggestion of the community leaders, the selection criteria were amended so that BRG members should also be respected members of the community, have an interest in community work and not belonging to another Tearfund committee. The leaders were then given two weeks to consult with their villages on which five people should form part of each BRG, based on all the agreed criteria (see box 1).

In line with Tearfund's work on church mobilisation and gender equality, each BRG had to include:

- a representative from the local churches
- at least one woman.

The names of the people suggested were posted on the local notice boards, allowing time for feedback and community approval, and in all but one location those suggested were fully accepted. The BRGs were then given training covering an overview of Tearfund and the Disaster Management Team, current programme objectives, an introduction to humanitarian accountability and their role as members of the BRGs.

Initially interaction between the Beneficiary Accountability Officer and the BRG groups was on a weekly basis, which was later reduced to monthly meetings with informal interactions with individual members during project visits in between. Each BRG group elected a chair who interacted more with the Beneficiary Accountability Officer in terms of communication to the rest of the members, especially in terms of scheduling meetings or training sessions.

### Results observed

- The BRGs viewed themselves as a bridge between Tearfund and the beneficiaries on accountability issues. They were soon given local names by the communities, clearly indicating the group was viewed as being both relevant and important. In Rendile areas, the BRGs were coined “Rumyeito” meaning those who seek truth and justice, in Samburu areas they were coined “Ndedei” meaning truth.
- Through the BRGs, Tearfund was able to reach more vulnerable members of each community, and ensure their voice was heard. For example, the BRGs enabled Tearfund to promote women involvement in community meetings. Overtime the role of women increased and in the majority of communities women were seen to make meaningful contributions during community discussions.
- The BRGs were able to play an important role in resolving conflicts, and in feeding back to Tearfund on the feelings and concerns held by communities in response to project activities. Below are a few examples:
  - In Ngurunit, one of the communities where Tearfund distributed camels, a dispute erupted over who should be on the beneficiary list. A group of women felt a male orphan should be included while a group of elders insisted a woman with many children was more deserving. Both groups threatened to cease working with Tearfund if their recommendations were not acted on. As there was no Tearfund office close to this project location the local BRG was instrumental in mediating between the women and elders, supporting Tearfund in the resolution of this conflict so that both groups remained engaged with future work.
  - In Kargi, locals approached the BRG complaining the identification of the camel beneficiaries had not been done fairly. The local chief had called an impromptu ‘baraza’ (community meeting), to nominate beneficiaries on the spot, and without full consultation. It appeared that the livestock committee had not intervened and had failed to ensure the agreed beneficiary selection criteria were used.
  - With feedback from the BRG, Tearfund was able to intervene at an early stage, ensuring the livestock committee reviewed the list, and the correct criteria were used. The feedback from Kargi was positive. The BRG was able to confirm the communities approved of the second list. They also reported there was a high level of satisfaction with the response shown by Tearfund following the initial complaints, and that the second process showed a high level of consultation and transparency.

*The programme also recognized the importance for communities themselves to feel the need to be accountable to the implementing organization in order to ensure real ownership [...]. The communities must see themselves and be seen by the implementing agency as accountable partners in their own development and not merely beneficiaries of free aid thus maintaining the destructive culture of dependence and welfare.*

**Brennen Matthews, Tearfund North Kenya Programme Director**

## Lessons Learnt

- When appointed and endorsed by the community and provided with basic training on the agency and their role, Beneficiary Reference Groups can play a pivotal role in enhancing participation and transparency during an emergency programme. The fact BRGs do not control the allocation of resources means they can help ensure that beneficiaries are identified in a fair manner, championing the rights of communities and beneficiaries, and supporting with conflict resolution. In addition, they can provide valuable feedback on how the agency and its programmatic decisions are perceived by the community. This enables the agency to respond quickly, preventing escalation of issues that could delay project implementation and damage the community-agency relationship.
- The role of BRGs needs to be carefully integrated with other activities aimed at improving accountability (i.e. complaint mechanisms, notice boards etc), and with the activities of all staff members. This will help to strengthen each activity and lead to a coherent approach, and reduce the tendency to restrict interaction with the BRGs to only one staff member.
- The agency needs to allocate necessary resources for induction and training of BRGs. This ensures that BRGs understand background information about the agency, enabling them to explain programme decisions to others and address concerns that related to the focus of Tearfund's work. Second it was important they understood their role in relation to Tearfund and the community, and the creation of this group did not result in additional power structures. In Northern Kenya clarification was needed to stress that the BRGs played an important role for the community and that they were not Tearfund staff, but could work with any NGO in the area.
- The composition of the BRGs will greatly affect the strength of each group and the work they are able to do, and so the selection of BRG members needs to be done with care. In Northern Kenya, Tearfund found there was variation in the roles each BRG was able to play within their community. Those BRGs that included church representatives were more able to resolve conflicts and work with the community compared to those that did not. This may reflect the importance of specifying diverse skills needed in the group, and explaining to communities during the BRG selection process the need to include individuals outside the traditional power lines who are respected members of the community.
- While BRGs can play a valuable role, engagement with such groups should not be a substitute for engagement with the wider community. It is still vital that staff inform, liaise, and consult with community members through meetings, focus groups and one-to-one discussions, making every effort to reach the more vulnerable sub-groups.

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