

Tearfund North Kenya Programme Suggestion boxes for community feedback

In August 2007 Monica Blagescu and Emily Rogers from the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) 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, jobs and relief aid.

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 a Livelihoods and Food Security, and Water and Sanitation project (April to October '07) was 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 need for complaint and response mechanisms

To facilitate feedback from the communities, in particular the more vulnerable members, the Beneficiary Reference Groups (BRGs) were established in each of Tearfund's ten project areas. The BRGs represented an independent group of individuals who were tasked with receiving and processing queries, complaints and feedback from committees and their community, and with working in close consultation with Tearfund staff so that concerns were swiftly addressed. For more details on the BRGs see case study: Increasing levels of participation – the role of the Beneficiary Reference Groups (BRGs)

While the BRGs provided a channel for receiving verbal complaints and feedback, the Beneficiary Accountability Officer felt there maybe a need to provide an alternative route that allowed more sensitive complaints to be raised. As a result the need and appropriateness of setting up complaint boxes was explored.

Setting up the mechanism

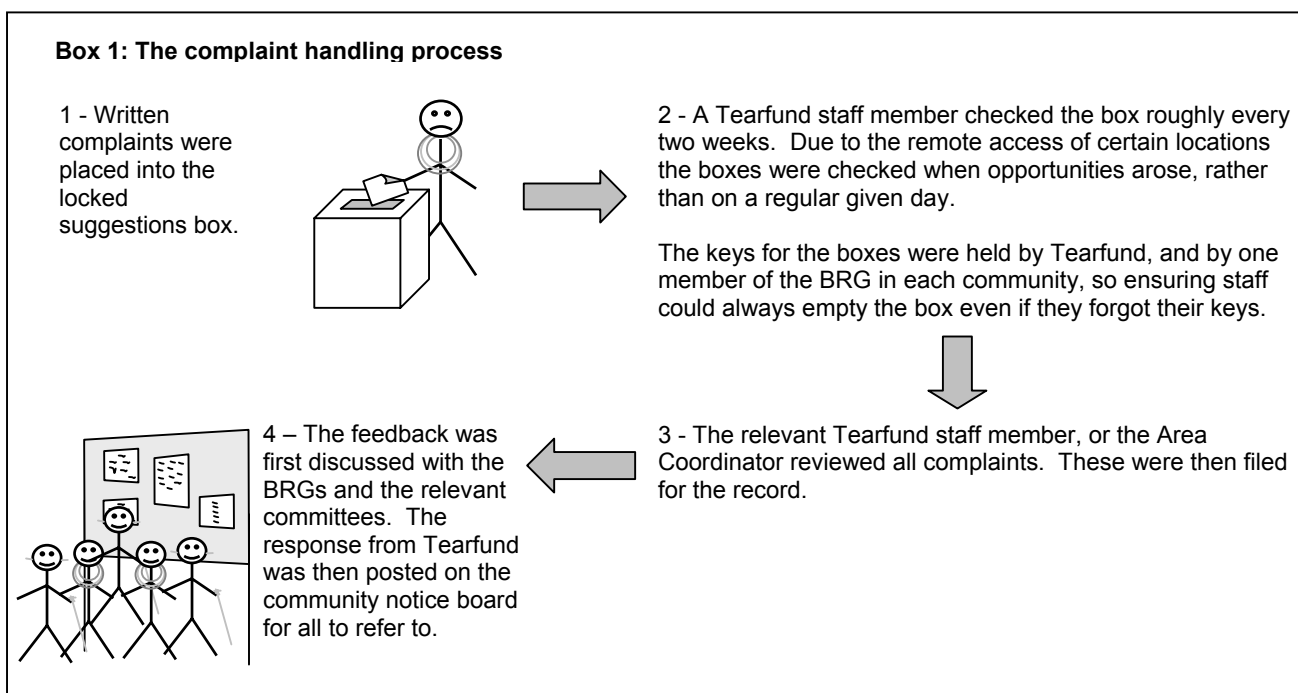
The idea of setting up complaint boxes was discussed in each community with the BRGs, using the example of ballot boxes to explain the concept. While some felt levels of illiteracy were too high in their communities, others felt the boxes could provide a valuable alternative method for raising complaints. Based on these discussions it was established that the word "complaint" was seen as negative and offensive, thus potentially preventing beneficiaries from raising concerns due to fear the agency may withdraw support.

As a result it was decided to set up locked suggestion boxes in five out of the ten areas where Tearfund was operational in North Kenya – in Kargi, Mount Kulal, Korr, Ilaut and Ngurunit.



The site of each suggestion box was chosen by the area chief, in conjunction with the BRGs, taking into account access, security of potential users, and where a strong wall was available to hold the box! The area chief was needed in order to give final authority on the use of the wall and consequently the boxes were placed on shops, at feeding centres and on the chief's compound.

A summary of the purpose of the suggestion boxes was displayed on one side, and the BRGs also raised awareness within the communities on their use. Box 1 summarises the complaint handling process established in these areas.



Resources required

In addition to time needed to sensitize the BRGs on the suggestion box, the cost of setting up the 5 boxes was estimated to be \$80.

Results observed

Complaints were mainly anonymous and over the initial 3 months Tearfund received 16 complaints via the five suggestion boxes, 15 of these were deemed relevant to Tearfund's work. These complaints mainly focused on a recent recruitment process for agricultural extension workers, and on the selection process for camel beneficiaries. While the total number of complaints to date was few, staff felt the suggestion boxes were instrumental in hearing views from the community that would not have been voiced during open meetings. For example, in Mount Kulal some candidates felt the chief had unfairly influenced the extension worker selection process, and effected who was chosen for the positions. This issue, which would not have been brought up in a public meeting, was raised through the suggestion boxes. As a result Tearfund was able to clarify the recruitment procedure, reassuring the community that a fair process had been conducted, and addressing the concerns before they escalated.

This positive aspect of the suggestion box was echoed by the BRGs, who also felt usage was closely linked to the type and levels of project activities being implemented at that time.

Lessons Learnt

- An effective complaint and response mechanism needs to be able to deal with ‘worst case scenario complaints’ that may raise more sensitive issues (i.e. complaints against staff behavior, allegations of fraud etc) in a safe and confidential way. During the design phase, it is worth considering who will see the complaint, who will be responsible for reviewing and addressing it to avoid any conflict of interest and protect the complainant. For example in North Kenya there was concern from some communities that the BRG member who held the key of the suggestion box may remove some complaints, or could recognize the handwriting on others and so know who submitted it. As a result of this feedback, the Beneficiary Accountability Officer reviewed who should hold the keys, and decided to restrict it to Tearfund staff only.
- Having different channels for individuals to raise concerns gives beneficiaries a choice, and enables them to use the method they prefer. In North Kenya the suggestion boxes, which some felt appealed to the more educated few in the community who were able to quickly grasp the concept, were complemented by the BRGs. It is important the different channels are integrated, and that complaints received through verbal channels are considered in the same way as written complaints. For example, in Northern Kenya the Beneficiary Accountability Officer planned to give each BRG a logbook to improve the way they recorded with verbal concerns. This would ensure the different complaints are captured; so common themes can be identified and then used to feed back into project and activity design. In addition the logbooks would help monitor responses to complaints and improve the chance that all are dealt with.
- Clear documentation of the mechanism established and the process involved in setting this up will serve as a basis against which the mechanism can be assessed and modifications can be made. In addition, this will also help all staff to understand the purpose and their role in the process.
- Low numbers of complaints may be due to programmatic issues (i.e. high levels of satisfaction or delays in project onset), or individuals may wish to see how the agency deals with complaints (i.e. speed of response, levels of confidentiality, lack of reprisals) before raising more sensitive issues. Alternatively it may indicate a lack of awareness about the purpose of the complaint and response mechanism and process followed. Clear information dissemination on the mechanism is vital both to inform individuals of the steps involved and to reassure them of confidentiality, security and non-retaliation. Careful engagement and monitoring is needed to distinguish between possible causes of low usage.
- It is important to clearly communicate what constitutes a valid complaint. For example individuals should be able to raise concerns about staff members, the work of Tearfund, how they feel they are being treated etc. In North Kenya it was soon realized that among the communities, raising concerns about an agency that is giving away something for free was a foreign concept. As a result of this, the Beneficiary Accountability Officer is working with the BRGs to further sensitize communities on the purpose of the suggestion boxes, and what individuals can complain about.

For more information contact:

Paul Gol, Beneficiary Accountability Officer, Tearfund: dmt-nkenyahap@tearfund.org

Monica Blagescu, Field Representative, HAP: mblagescu@hapinternational.org

Emily Rogers, Field Support Officer, HAP: erogers@hapinternational.org