



**Save the Children**



**The Open  
University**

**Monitoring, Evaluation,  
Accountability and Learning (MEAL)**

# 7 Accountability

Keywords: Accountability, information sharing, participation, complaints handling, systems, processes, rights, children



## Introduction

In this session we are going to have a look at accountability. To start we will look into what accountability means in practice, the historical context of the accountability movement and how we define accountability at Save the Children. We will then take a deeper look into programme accountability by covering information sharing, participation, and complaints handling.

## Learning Outcomes for this Session

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- Describe the background to programme accountability and what it means in practice
- Understand key elements of information sharing for programme accountability
- Describe why information sharing is an important element of accountability
- Understand key elements of participation for programme accountability
- Understand key elements of complaints handling mechanisms for programme accountability

### I What does accountability mean in practice?

Accountability to children and communities involves giving them a voice and opportunity to influence relevant decisions affecting whether and how we work with the people we seek to assist. It involves giving children and communities the power to hold us to account in ways that influence our policies, priorities, and actions at local, national and global levels.

Programme Accountability is not new; it's part of the basics of good-quality programming practice and results-based management, and to a certain extent we are doing it already. What we want to ensure is that it is systematically embedded in our ways of working.

Programme accountability has interdependent aspects which collectively amount to systems and processes through which Save the Children tries to ensure accountability for our programme activities. At Save the Children we define the following aspects of accountability:

- **Information sharing:** sharing timely, relevant and clear information is an important aspect of accountability quality programming.
- **Participation:** discussing together, deciding together and working together with children, communities and partners.
- **Seeking feedback from children and communities and handling their complaints:** Setting up formal mechanisms in our projects for people to express views and concerns on our approach, activities and impact, as well as on safety issues and the behaviour of our staff. It is also our responsibility to provide responses to serious concerns and complaints regarding our activities.
- **Monitoring, evaluating and learning:** systematically giving voice to children and communities in our monitoring and evaluation exercises, including data from our complaints and feedback mechanisms to inform changes in implementation and learning.
- **Building staff competencies for accountable programming:** this involves ensuring that our staff have the technical and behavioural competencies to deliver our commitments to communities.

These aspects are in line with the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) standard for accountability and quality management, which applies to humanitarian, development and advocacy work done by NGOs.

### 1.1 The historical context of Accountability

The accountability movement stems largely from the humanitarian sector of the mid-1990s. It has its foundations in the Humanitarian Principles, rights based programming, and the Red Cross/Crescent Code of conduct. Although a single event cannot be attributed as the starting point, many argue that the shortcomings and subsequent learning from the humanitarian response to the Rwanda Genocide was the catalyst for the movement. The Joint Evaluation of the Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR), which was unprecedented in scale, found evidence of poor coordination and a lack of accountability to genocide survivors. It highlighted that good intentions were not enough, and that poorly designed and implemented interventions can worsen the vulnerabilities of the people we seek to assist, while also wasting resources. These findings pushed the sector towards identifying ways and means to instil greater professionalism, set industry standards of quality management, and to establish mechanisms to allow the people we seek to assist to hold us to account. The JEEAR specifically recommended that aid organisations strengthen their systems for improving accountability to recipients of assistance: this was to be done by establishing mechanisms for consultation with people affected by humanitarian emergencies. A criticism levelled at the sector was the imbalance of power between aid agencies and the people they seek to assist. It was perceived that most of our attention is directed towards accountability to our 'official' (Donors etc.) stakeholders and too little to aid recipients, which, you could argue, is still true today.

Since the mid-1990s, and with the support of a wide range of donors, there has been a proliferation of quality and accountability initiatives. These include Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities Network, Emergency Capacity Building Project, Humanitarian Accountability Partnership, People in Aid, and the Sphere Project. Within the Red Cross/Red Crescent and NGO movement the debate has matured, with many organisations committing to addressing issues of accountability. Parallel to this, many donors have emphasised the importance of accountability to affected populations. Although the movement is well entrenched with the Red Cross/Red Crescent family and various NGOs, the United Nations made its first steps towards accountability in 2011 with the endorsement of the Commitments of Accountability to Affected Populations by the IASC principals.

One criticism of the accountability movement is the lack of evidence that accountability mechanisms do increase the efficiency and impact of programs. 'with Christian Aid and HAP International' which is the first concerted effort to build the evidence base on the causal link between accountability and impact. The report is entitled, *Improving Impact: Do Accountability Mechanisms Deliver Results?*

Over the years, the notion of accountability has developed to represent the systems, processes, and practices organisations establish and follow in order to be accountable to the people we seek to assist and deliver effective and efficient projects to. The movement has grown beyond the humanitarian sector, with discussions of effectiveness in the development sector now strongly influencing the accountability agenda.

Today, accountability is part of Save the Children's core values. We define accountability as taking responsibility for using our resources efficiently, achieving measurable results and being accountable to our supporters, partners and, most of all, children. Accountability features as a main component of our organisation's Programme Quality Framework, and within the Essential Standards. It is important to note that the accountability mechanisms we seek to implement in our programmes should complement our child safe guarding procedures.

### 1.2 Why is it important to be accountable?

An accountable and participatory approach brings important advantages, which include:

- better understanding of the needs of the people we seek to assist
- improved relationship with (and acceptance by) communities
- reduced risk of fraud or of funds being used inefficiently
- reduced risk of harm to the people we seek to assist that might be caused by a breach of the conduct by our own staff or by the design of the intervention itself
- the ability to demonstrate to our donors that we are able to deliver on quality processes such as accountability in programme design and implementation.

## 2 Information sharing

### 2.1 What do we mean by Information sharing?

Information sharing is how an organisation ensures that the people it aims to assist and other stakeholders have access to timely, relevant and clear information about the organisation and its activities. It involves looking at the way we currently share information, making it more systematic and standardised, and producing varied tools for various audiences. This includes sharing information on:

- the organisation
- what behaviour people can expect from our staff
- how people can be involved in the project
- how to provide feedback and complaints

This does not include sharing information for visibility purposes or promotion of the organisation.

### 2.2 Why is information sharing important?

Proactively sharing timely, relevant and clear information about our organisation and how the work we do with children, communities, and partner organisations can improve understanding, build trusting relationships, and support the cohesive involvement of key stakeholders.

Sharing information is essential to quality programming as it creates the opportunity of combining with a range of stakeholders to work more cohesively and better coordinate efforts. An organisation which does not share information appropriately risks:

- **Ineffective projects and waste:** if an organisation does not share information in a timely manner it can lead to a lack of engagement during the project cycle.
- **Programmatic setbacks:** misunderstandings on the design and beneficiary selection can result in setbacks at different stages of the programme cycle.
- **Negative perceptions of the organisation:** misinformation and a lack of information about project activities can result in frustration and anger. This can lead to situations of increased insecurity and affect the ability of organisations to operate securely and effectively.
- **Abuse and child safeguarding problems:** if people, including children, are not aware of their rights, appropriate staff behaviour and conduct, and feedback procedures, this can leave beneficiaries vulnerable to misconduct.

It is essential to make sure we share information in languages, formats and media that can be easily understood by the children and communities we work with.

### Activity 1 (exploratory)

Here are some good questions to ask when thinking about sharing information in programme design and implementation. Try to answer as many as possible....

1. How can you make sure that information is available and accessible to different members of the community, including men, women, children and the elderly?
2. How will you give information? Verbally, in meetings, and/or in written form?
3. How will you display information? Using maps, pictures, pie charts (for project finances) and photos is a good way of presenting information to people who may not be able to read.
4. How will you update the information, and how regularly?

### Answers

Here are some things I thought about when trying to answer these questions:

1. Children, disabled people, men, and women all have different information needs. We could do an assessment to understand and identify the information needs and various forms of information discrimination. In our emergency responses we always try to do an information needs assessment early on to establish what existing channels for communication and information sharing exist, but also people's preferred mechanisms which informs the design of our complaints response mechanisms.
2. Information is commonly shared in a written format but the target audience might be illiterate. We could integrate short information sharing sessions during routine M & E visits, or use a loudspeaker to share information during distributions or other public gatherings. Integrating key messages and programme information into traditional forms of storytelling or singing can also be an effective way of sharing information.
3. Some people prefer more visual information such as examples of the aid they are entitled to. We could use diagrams and cartoons placed in public places. However, it is important that diagrams and cartoons are piloted with the community to ensure they are conveying the right information and do not offend anyone. They should also be placed in an easily accessible location.
4. Timely and regular information is essential with different contexts requiring different approaches. Community meetings can be organised to share updates with your target audience. If you organise community meetings, as part of your wider information sharing strategy, it is important to consider the traditional activities of communities. You do not want to detract communities from income generating activities or seasonal practices. It is also important to consider the safety and cost implications of gathering people together in a certain location at a specified time. For example, in Kenya we sent information to community volunteers about upcoming distributions to remote communities and they told the rest of the community.

## 3 Participation

### 3.1 What do we mean by Participation?

Participation is a fundamental principle of accountability and involves listening to the people we seek to assist and incorporating their views and analysis in programme decisions.

The HAP standard benchmark on participation says that it is our responsibility to enable children and communities and other key stakeholders to participate meaningfully at all stages of the programme cycle, right from the start, when we plan and design activities, as well as during implementation, and in monitoring and evaluation.

Participation takes different forms: child/community-led, collaborative, consultative and non-participatory. Programmes may not consist of just one type of participation but may naturally involve a combination of the above.

**Non-participatory** is negative and may be tokenistic or manipulative. However, the other three types are all equally as valid and are suited to different projects and stages of the programme cycle.

**Consultative participation** involves seeking the views of children and adults in order to increase their knowledge and understanding of their lives and the issues affecting them. It recognises their beliefs as well as their expertise, but is led and managed by us or our partners. Consultations may be used in project design and in monitoring and evaluation.

**Collaborative participation** involves children and adults partnering with our staff in some capacity: here adults and children work in partnership to make decisions and implement projects. Children and adults may collaborate in the research phase of a project or during project implementation in initiatives such as school-based clubs.

**Child/community-led participation** is when children and adults are empowered to lead their own projects or initiatives, either individually or as part of their own organisations, clubs or parliaments. In this case, our role is about facilitation, offering advice and support.

In terms of our work on participation, we are looking at two issues: first, improving the scope of participation across the programme cycle; and second, improving the quality of participation.

### 3.2 Why is participation important?

The people we seek to assist are our most important stakeholders. Quality participation is about leveraging the skills and knowledge of those we seek to assist, including children, and enabling them to make informed decisions. Ultimately, quality participation can empower children and communities to transform their own lives.

Failing to understand issues as characterised by the children and adults you work with can lead to projects which are misaligned with their priority needs and are not fit for purpose. Non participation and poor participatory approaches can reinforce the status quo/existing power dynamics by only listening to the most dominant voices of actors.

Here are some benefits of ensuring participation throughout the project cycle:

- **Situation analysis/assessment stage:** participation allows for an organisation to get a better understanding of the issues affecting children and adults in order to design programmes which address the priority needs and are fit for purpose.
- **Design stage:** participation supports a context appropriate response based on a good understanding of the local context e.g. the participation of target populations in the development of problem trees, solutions and locally relevant indicators.
- **Implementation stage:** participation can contribute to a more efficient project by better identifying inefficiencies and maintaining constructive community relationships.
- **MEAL:** participation facilitates learning and continual improvement. How? Would be good to add a couple of sentences to explain the how.

## 4 Handling complaints

### 4.1 What is a feedback and complaints mechanism?

A complaints and feedback mechanism comprises a set of clear, transparent procedures that provide children and communities with access to a safe confidential means of voicing complaints on issues within the control of Save the Children. A complaints and feedback mechanism should incorporate multiple entry points – i.e. ways in which the complaint can be submitted.

Complaints mechanisms must be effective, accessible, safe and confidential. Complaints mechanisms are required to process highly sensitive issues which may tarnish the reputation of Save the Children or the individual who is being accused of wrong doing. There is a strong likelihood that the mechanism will receive malicious and unfounded complaints. Poorly managed complaints mechanisms can be dangerous for the complainant if confidentiality is breached. It is therefore very important that we establish robust mechanisms and follow strict procedures.

### 4.2 Why are complaints mechanisms important?

Despite the good intentions of Save the Children, we must recognise that we are not exempt from processes needing improvement, fraud, or a breach of the code of conduct by members of our staff. A complaints mechanism is an essential part of quality management as it provides a mechanism to amend serious issues and systematically gather feedback on the quality of our projects.

### 4.3 What is the difference between a complaint and feedback?

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction. It is a specific grievance of anyone who believes that the organisation has failed to meet a stated commitment, or of anyone who has been negatively affected by Save the Children programmes or its staff. A complaint primarily includes concerns about the standards of service, action or lack of action by Save the Children or its staff and representatives, which include partner staff, volunteers, contractors/consultants, community committee members or anybody directly involved in the delivery of our work. **A complaint to which we can respond has to be about an action for which Save the Children is responsible, or one which is within our sphere of influence.**

Feedback is a positive or negative statement of opinion about our programmes and the behaviour of our staff and representatives: this is shared for information or action but not with the intention of lodging a formal complaint. Depending on the nature or seriousness of the feedback, however, Save the Children may need to take the same action as if the feedback were a complaint.

### 4.4 What is the difference between Sensitive and Non-Sensitive Complaints?

It is also important to recognise the difference between non-sensitive and sensitive complaints.

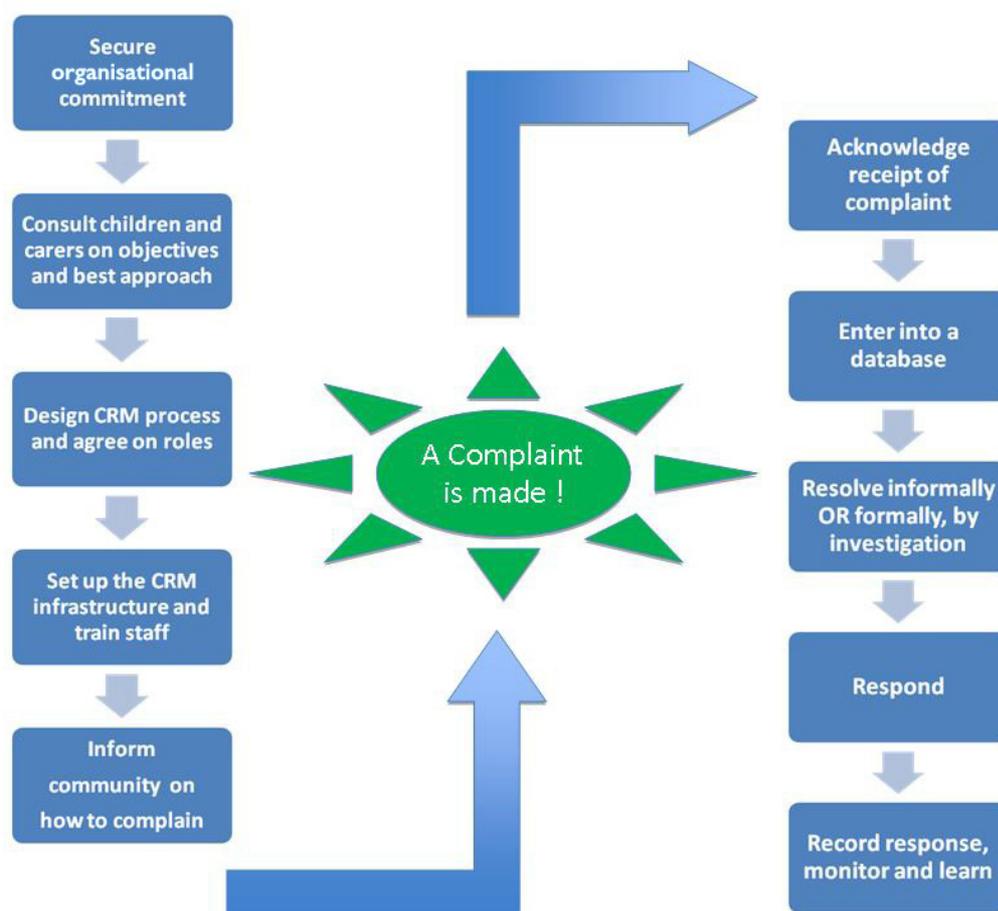
A **non-sensitive complaint** concerns the implementation of activities or programme decisions taken by Save the Children or partners that can be handled with knowledge of the programme and common sense.

A **sensitive complaint** includes issues related to:

- Corruption, misuse of project funds or materials
- Any violation of the Child Safeguarding Policy or serious violation of the Code of Conduct, such as any form of exploitation, abuse or harassment (including sexual, physical and verbal) of beneficiaries by staff
- Discrimination of beneficiaries on the basis of race, gender, creed, religion, sexual orientation, age, etc.
- Other complaints judged as serious by Save the Children programme/complaint handling staff, such as violation of local laws, concerns around safety or harm of children or other beneficiaries arising from the way the organisation is carrying out its work.

### How to set up a complaints and feedback mechanism in ten steps

We are committed to giving children and their communities the chance to raise concerns or complaints, and to respond to them appropriately. Here are ten steps to help you set up a complaints and feedback mechanism (CFM). You can also watch our film, which explains the ten steps below. Using an example CFM in Dadaab, Kenya:



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXvIn3rddmA&feature=youtu.be>

It is important to consider the context and preferences of the children and communities where you will be setting up the complaints and feedback mechanism. Here are some mechanisms (entry points) children and adults may prefer:

- a suggestions box
- a complaints desk
- a telephone hotline
- regular 'open house' meetings to receive feedback and complaints

- setting up a community engagement committee – comprised of respected community members who receive concerns or complaints on our behalf and share them with us.

#### 4.5 Recording Complaints

Formal complaints should be recorded on a complaints form, in a logbook, or on a database.

After recording the complaint, a member of staff should complete the relevant forms (e.g. child safeguarding or fraud incident), as appropriate.

As you record the complaints, it is important to categorise them in order to make it easy to analyse trends afterwards. Consider using the categories below:

<b>Category 1</b>	Request for information
<b>Category 2</b>	Request for assistance
<b>Category 3</b>	Minor dissatisfaction with activities (e.g., missing items from kits, lack of follow-up, etc)
<b>Category 4</b>	Major dissatisfaction with activities (e.g., poor quality items, beneficiary selection issues, safety of children/adults being put at risk, e.g., unsafe construction site, etc)
<b>Category 5</b>	Breaches of Save the Children's Code of Conduct and/or Child Safeguarding Policy (e.g. allegations of inappropriate behaviour or misconduct by SC or partner staff or representatives including fraud, theft, corruption (e.g., misappropriation of goods, requests for payment), or verbal, physical or sexual abuse, sexual exploitation of beneficiaries, etc)
<b>Category 6</b>	Allegations of child abuse or sexual exploitation of beneficiaries by non- Save the Children staff or representatives, i.e. a member of the community, staff of other NGOs or the UN.

**Activity 2 (SAQ)**

To wrap up this session we are going to do a short true or false questionnaire on what we have covered in this session.

- |   |            |
|---|------------|
| 1. Complaints are the same as feedback.   | True/False |
| 2. Participation activities are only conducted during the situational analysis/assessment stage | True/False |
| 3. Poor information sharing can lead to programme setbacks                                      | True/False |
| 4. Complaints handling is more important than participation                                     | True/False |
| 5. A violation of the code of conduct is a sensitive complaint                                  | True/False |
| 6. Communities have a right to raise a complaint and also to receive a response                 | True/False |
| 7. Aid agencies must resolve all types of complaints, regardless of what they are about         | True/False |
| 8. We should have more than one channel (way) in which complaints can be raised by communities  | True/False |
| 9. Complaint mechanisms can provide valuable information for Save the Children                  | True/False |
| 10. A category 6 complaint is a request for more information.                                   | True/False |

## Summary of this Session

In this session we have covered the basics of programme accountability. To start off with, we considered what accountability looks like in practice and the origins of the movement. We then looked a bit deeper into programme accountability, focusing on information sharing, participation and complaints and feedback.

For more detail on the topics discussed in the session, Save the Children International has a central reference document, *Programme Accountability Guidance Pack*, some very practical tools and information, which country programmes can use to promote planning and action on establishing accountability mechanisms across a wide range of contexts. We strongly recommend you download the document for future reference.

## Self-Assessment Questions (SAQ) answers

1. False 2. False 3. True 4. False 5. True 6. True 7. False 8. True 9. True 10. False

## Resources

### **The 2013 Humanitarian Accountability Report**

The Humanitarian Accountability Report, published annually, looks at developments around quality and accountability. The 2013 report reviews progress made over the past decade, and presents innovations the sector has adopted to make itself more accountable to populations affected by crises. The document also contains an excellent list of resources and Quality and Accountability Initiatives.

<http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/2013-har.pdf>

### **Improving Impact: Do Accountability Mechanisms Deliver Results?**

Jointly commissioned by Christian Aid, Save the Children UK and HAP, this report is the first of its kind to provide evidence of the contribution of accountability mechanisms to improving the quality and impact of aid projects.

<http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/improving-impact-do-accountability-mechanisms-deliver-results.pdf>

### **Guide the 2010 HAP Standard in Accountability and Quality Management**

The Guide to the 2010 HAP Standard in Accountability and Quality Management puts the widely used 2010 HAP Standard into context and identifies challenges and solutions for organisations looking to instil accountability in their management systems.

<http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/guide-to-the-2010-hap-standard-printer-friendly-version-new.pdf>

### **Programme Accountability Guidance Pack**

The Programme Accountability Guidance Pack brings together practical and tested 'how-to' guidance, films and training materials designed to help development and humanitarian workers put accountability into practice.

The pack is primarily aimed at country-level Save the Children and partner staff responsible for implementing development or humanitarian projects and programmes.

<http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/programme-accountability-guidance-pack>

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