Help desk at a hygiene voucher distribution point in Alwash village, Iraq. Photo: Haider AlCharmondy/Oxfam.

RESPONSIVE LISTENING THROUGH IMPROVED FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

End-of-project evaluation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Responsive Listening through Improved Feedback Mechanisms project sought to capitalize on face-to-face feedback through the use of information communication technology (ICT) tools and accompanying methodologies. Its aim was to improve responsiveness to community feedback. The feedback mechanism documents feedback by using mobile data collection that includes a built-in case management system. The resulting feedback can then be referred, managed or closed and the entire feedback pathway is visualized on an online dashboard. The project was launched in the Za'atari refugee camp, Jordan, as a pilot project and expanded to include the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel (OPTI), Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. Focusing on the latter five countries, this evaluation seeks to understand the extent to which the project has facilitated Oxfam's country teams to improve accountability; more specifically, it considers changes to the collection and management of feedback, and teams' responsiveness.

A significant success of this project is that it has facilitated a change in accountability culture. The division of roles and responsibilities between monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) staff and programme teams is being challenged, resulting in greater responsiveness (especially in Iraq and Lebanon). All the country representatives included in the learning event held in Iraq in July 2019 agree that more needs to be done to ensure buy-in to the feedback mechanisms, and accountability more broadly from programmes and operations teams, not solely MEAL teams.

In terms of inclusiveness, teams have had different experiences in their efforts to equitably reach vulnerable men and women. In Lebanon and Syria, teams have reached approximate parity in access and participation in feedback between men and women, while other teams have struggled to access women. Some teams, most notably in Syria, OPTI and Yemen, face increasingly restrictive working environments, with authorities requesting permits to use ICT and poor security situations for outreach teams in certain areas. Despite these challenges, the feedback systems are functioning.

This project has seen positive shifts in accountability in the country teams. Programme changes are taking place, albeit mostly at an operational level, which take time to adopt. All teams reported improved responsiveness and better integration into existing accountability initiatives, and that this system has become best practice for Oxfam and others at country level.

1 PROJECT SUMMARY

The Responsive Listening through Improved Feedback Mechanisms project was supported by Elhra's Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF), a grant-making facility supporting organizations and individuals to identify, nurture and share innovative and scalable solutions to the most pressing challenges facing effective humanitarian assistance.[1] The HIF is funded by aid from the UK government and the Directorate-General of the European Commission for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (DG ECHO).

This HIF implementation grant built on learning from a previous pilot,[2] also funded by HIF, in Za'atari Refugee Camp in 2015–2016. That project set out to support field staff to capture informal face-to-face feedback by creatively using ICT, with the aim of enabling responsive and accountable uses of information.
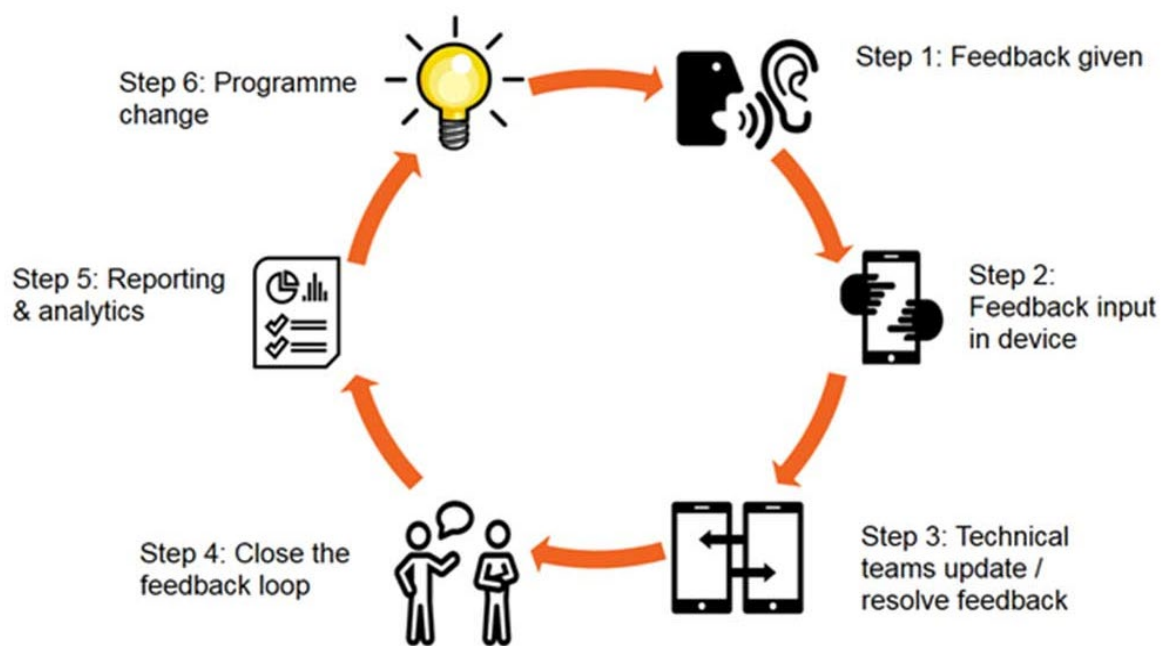
The initiative being evaluated was designed to lead to more representative understanding of community needs. The focus was on changing processes by understanding the way humanitarian staff and their partners use information and the mechanisms available to them. An ICT-enabled solution was used as part of this project design to enable staff to more efficiently capture and respond to feedback received from the communities with which they work.

Oxfam's theory of change is that, when organizations are seen to adapt programmes based on what communities are saying, they can build vital trust and improve the quality and accountability of humanitarian programming. This relies on mechanisms to effectively respond to timely, relevant and appropriate information, and focuses on active use of data for responsive programming.

The project started in July 2017 and ran until July 2019. Implementation was phased, with Iraq and Gaza starting in the summer of 2018, Lebanon in November 2018, Syria in January 2019 and Yemen in June 2019.

Each country follows a similar feedback cycle model, using SurveyCTO[3] for mobile data collection and internal case referrals, and Power BI[4] for reporting and analytics. Data is collected through a variety of feedback mechanisms depending on what is suitable for the context; examples include face-to-face, hotlines and suggestion boxes. Regardless of the mechanism, feedback is input by Oxfam staff, partners or volunteers into SurveyCTO using a mobile device or computer. The people collecting the data may be Oxfam staff, partners or volunteers depending on the context in each location.

Figure 1: Feedback mechanism workflow

Step 6: Programme change

Step 1: Feedback given

Step 5: Reporting & analytics

Step 2: Feedback input in device

Step 4: Close the feedback loop

Step 3: Technical teams update / resolve feedback

2 EVALUATION DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This evaluation focuses on five core objectives:

1. Improved responsiveness across Oxfam's programming in targeted areas, enabled by the feedback mechanism.
2. Changes in behaviours, attitudes and norms by staff, partners and community members on accountability.
3. Improved inclusivity and accessibility of feedback mechanisms.
4. Improved coordination internally and between agencies.
5. The use of data to inform programming.

(See **Annex 1** for the full evaluation objectives and questions.)

The evaluation centres around the specific needs and existing data in the countries being evaluated. The evaluation design was flexible to allow for specific challenges in each country. Additionally, different types of accountability data were collected in each country to measure the effectiveness of the feedback mechanism, and each country had different levels of access to communities. The evaluation was designed with a conflict-sensitive approach to ensure that Oxfam staff, partners and community members would not be adversely affected in producing the necessary data. The evaluation questions and criteria were shared with the MEAL staff overseeing the project in their respective countries. The following minimum standards were set:

1. Baseline and endline knowledge, attitude and practice (KAP) surveys for staff and partners, with the sample size varying according to the number of staff in each country.
2. Pre- and post-project data collected on a) awareness of the mechanism; b) use of the mechanism; and c) perceptions around the responsiveness of the mechanism in the communities in which Oxfam works.
3. Qualitative data collected during awareness sessions, hearing sessions, learning reviews and evaluations focused on accountability and the feedback mechanism.
4. Key learning drawn out of the learning event held in July 2019 in Iraq, including country team reflections on the responsiveness, inclusiveness, programme changes and culture of accountability in their respective countries and as a group overall.

In addition, the evaluators reviewed Power BI data on gender/age disparities in the use of the feedback mechanism, trends in the feedback, the time it took to close cases and other general trends across the countries. These were verified with MEAL staff in workshops at the learning event.

The evaluation design was flexible to allow each country to use the evaluation tools that best suit their contexts. Notably, Syria, Yemen and Gaza had limited access to affected populations and faced severe restrictions on data collection. To ensure the evaluation measured comparable results, however, the same thematic questions and topics were explored in each context.

Participants at the learning event in Iraq, July 2019. Standing left to right: Ania Gaboune, Mustafa Ghadhba, Sadeq Alramly, Zhean Ismael, Hala Elsous, Sarah Chalhoub, Yahya Hussein. Kneeling left to right: Carly Sheehan, Emily Tomkys Valteri, Ala Salam, Alhasan Swairjo. Photo: Erbil hotel staff.

3 RESULTS

This section will cover the results from country teams' quantitative and qualitative data, the KAP surveys and learning event workshops held in July 2019.

FEEDBACK TRENDS

ICT tools

Using SurveyCTO for data collection, processing and internal case referrals and management has been highly successful. The system can maintain high levels of consistency and standards, and track indicators (e.g. response time, gender/age disaggregation of feedback), while being adaptable to each country's unique feedback data requirements. All respondents during their country presentations and at the learning event highlighted the ICT system as the most positive aspect of the project. The Power BI dashboards improved the efficiency of reporting and allowed more streamlined decisions on the basis of the data, as it became easier to understand trends visually. Country teams, especially in Lebanon, reported using the Power BI dashboards as the basis for regular internal learning reviews with programme teams to assess programmatic effectiveness.

Feedback channels

The majority of feedback was given face-to-face (including help desks and monitoring activities), which affirms the projects' original hypothesis about people's preferences for in-person relationships. Helplines channelled 43% of feedback data. Helplines were particularly popular in Iraq, to the extent that, once this country is removed from the overall count, the figure drops to 15%. This demonstrates the need to be aware of different preferences or common practices in different contexts, and the need to offer multiple channels as appropriate. The project therefore was able to capitalize on feedback channels that were most relevant, accessible and inclusive for their contexts and the people with which the teams work.

Intersectionality: the characteristics of those giving feedback

Analysis across all the countries reveals that men gave at least 53% of feedback and women 33%. (Gender is not always captured, or feedback is sometimes given in groups, hence the figure does not add up to 100%.) Men gave more than twice as many reports of minor dissatisfaction as women did; women made 62% of requests for assistance. Women gave more positive feedback than men; however,

women may have been reluctant to provide feedback that was not anonymous because they are often most vulnerable when providing feedback. This is true across the project, but also seen in the data from other countries where Oxfam has implemented this feedback mechanism.

Most teams reported that gender-disaggregated data, especially when viewed through the clear Power BI dashboards, allowed them to accurately identify gaps in inclusivity. The teams in Lebanon and Iraq, for example, mentioned that the dashboards allowed the MEAL teams to initiate conversations with the respective programme teams to ensure that strategies were identified and developed to enable vulnerable groups to feel more equipped to provide feedback and receive timely responses.

Only 59 submissions were made by Oxfam beneficiaries identifying as having a disability (of which: females 64%, males 36%). Individual non-beneficiaries made up 71% of all submissions by people with a disability (out of 2,360 submissions overall). The teams reported a lack of clarity around definitions and guidelines for how to capture data related to disabilities. Several country teams asked about disabilities at the household level; however, this did not necessarily mean that the feedback data included the views and feedback of those with disabilities. The teams indicated the need for more vulnerability assessments to better understand the challenges of people identifying as having disabilities and their interactions with the feedback mechanism.
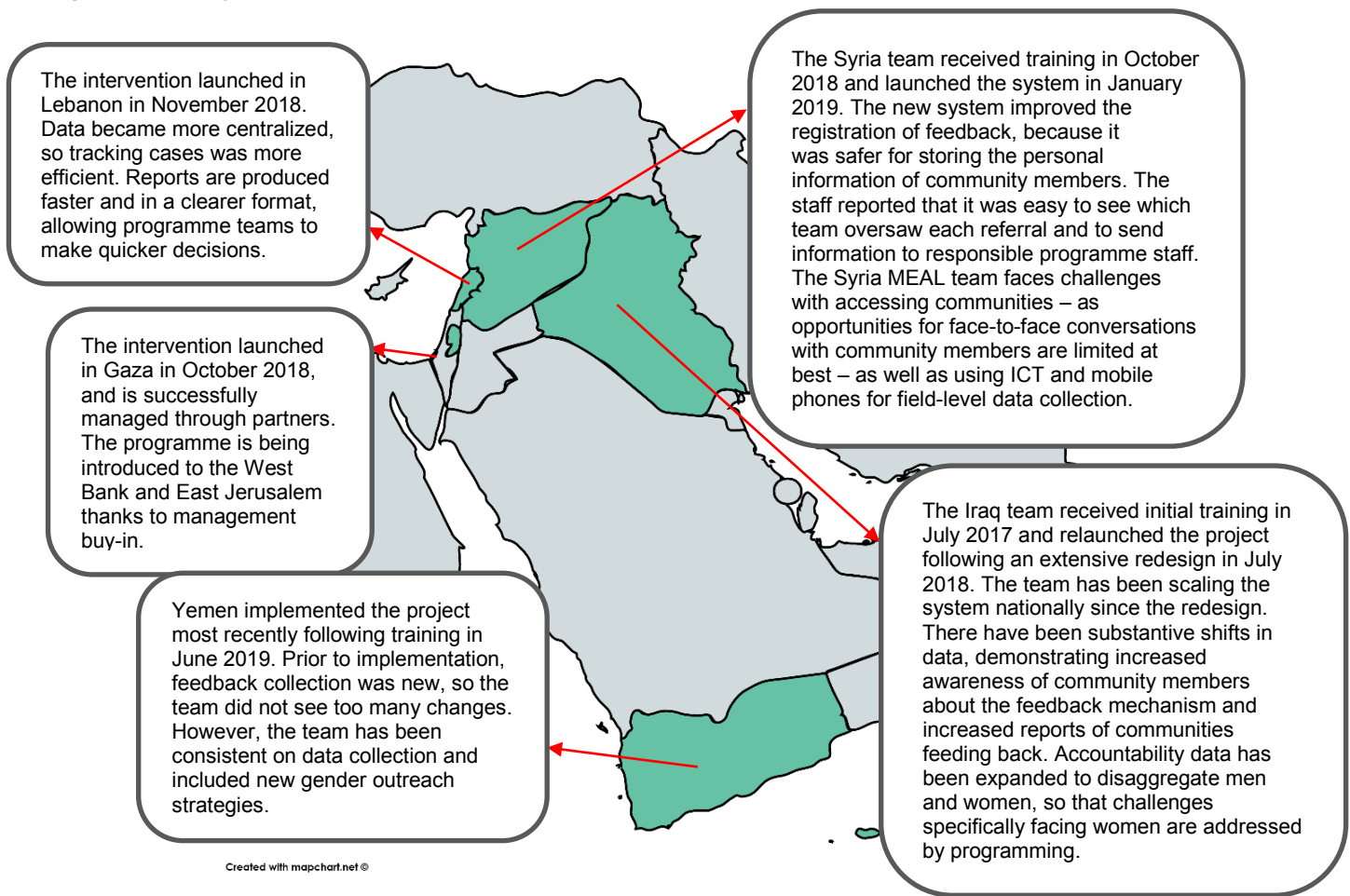
Non-beneficiaries

The bulk of feedback for most country teams was 'requests for assistance'. 43% of all feedback recorded was given by non-beneficiaries, primarily requesting assistance (76%). The teams agreed that this is not solely an issue of beneficiary selection and targeting from programmes, but that beneficiary selection is political. Often, teams are given lists by local, regional or (in some cases) national authorities. The second biggest feedback category for non-beneficiaries was 'minor dissatisfaction' (22%), with records showing this was related to distributions for public health promotion, and emergency food security and vulnerable livelihoods.

Box 1: Positive feedback

Out of 210 cases of positive feedback, the majority came from Syria (122). In Syria, Oxfam is able to reach communities who have not had widespread access to humanitarian aid. Therefore, much of the positive feedback in Syria is from communities thanking Oxfam for being present.

Figure 2: Country experience overview

The intervention launched in Lebanon in November 2018. Data became more centralized, so tracking cases was more efficient. Reports are produced faster and in a clearer format, allowing programme teams to make quicker decisions.

The intervention launched in Gaza in October 2018, and is successfully managed through partners. The programme is being introduced to the West Bank and East Jerusalem thanks to management buy-in.

Yemen implemented the project most recently following training in June 2019. Prior to implementation, feedback collection was new, so the team did not see too many changes. However, the team has been consistent on data collection and included new gender outreach strategies.

The Syria team received training in October 2018 and launched the system in January 2019. The new system improved the registration of feedback, because it was safer for storing the personal information of community members. The staff reported that it was easy to see which team oversaw each referral and to send information to responsible programme staff. The Syria MEAL team faces challenges with accessing communities – as opportunities for face-to-face conversations with community members are limited at best – as well as using ICT and mobile phones for field-level data collection.

The Iraq team received initial training in July 2017 and relaunched the project following an extensive redesign in July 2018. The team has been scaling the system nationally since the redesign. There have been substantive shifts in data, demonstrating increased awareness of community members about the feedback mechanism and increased reports of communities feeding back. Accountability data has been expanded to disaggregate men and women, so that challenges specifically facing women are addressed by programming.

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RESULTS BY EVALUATION CRITERIA

Responsiveness to feedback and complaints

'Responsiveness' refers to changes made to a programme based on feedback – the results for this are mixed. In general, the system has led to increased clarity of the roles and responsibilities within Oxfam and partner teams of who manages feedback and how feedback is managed. When clearly organized, the data workflow can signal actions to the relevant focal points.

Over 80% of cases were about selection criteria (e.g. not being eligible for assistance). Responsiveness in these cases is quite difficult, as it requires improved coordination with programme design teams to increase the visibility of selection criteria or establish whether an error has been made.

In many of the countries, mechanisms already existed for capturing feedback, although the extent to which they were effective and responsive is not clear. With this project, all staff reported increased efficiency in internal referrals, case management and clear responsibility for responses.

'I am proud that we built trust through transparency, and that communities feel like someone is listening.'
Quote from country MEAL staff from the learning event in Iraq, 2019

The speed of responses has improved across all country teams. Of course, it takes time before changes are embedded within programme design, so it is important to consider the duration of the system's use in each country in the analysis. Nonetheless, significant programmatic changes, following feedback received, have taken place in:

• selection criteria;

• project locations;

• targeting strategies to include more vulnerable groups; and

• adapting to restrictive and unsafe operating environments to ensure communities have access to Oxfam programming.

Several countries have developed clear guidelines on timelines – for example, how long is required to respond to each type of feedback, by whom and what kind of referral is required, and time limits for follow-up and closing the loop. Having clear timelines on required responses incentivizes responsible teams to manage cases efficiently. Better feedback submission numbers demonstrate trust in the system, and when compared against the number of cases managed, show responsiveness. Overall, response times have improved in the project countries that have had time to embed responsiveness in clear roles and responsibilities of all teams. **Figure 3** demonstrates spikes in feedback data coinciding with the launch of the project; this trend has also been seen in Iraq and Gaza, where there was more time to implement the project.

Figure 3: Lebanon's submissions over time (project began in November 2018)

Changes in behaviours and attitudes among staff, partners and community on accountability and feedback

Some changes have taken place, especially at community level, in each of the project countries. However, Oxfam staff report that MEAL teams are still perceived internally as being responsible for accountability and feedback mechanisms.

In the KAP survey, overall positive shifts were found in the countries where the feedback mechanism was implemented for the longest period of time (Iraq, Lebanon and Gaza). There were increases in accountability training; there was awareness of the feedback mechanism; staff and partners reported an increase in knowledge of accountability; a 7% increase was reported in involving communities in the design and use of the feedback mechanism; and finally, staff and partners reported that the documentation of feedback received face-to-face rose from 48% to 65%.

Other areas remained relatively consistent in the KAP survey, namely the importance of feedback collection, whether staff and partners are concerned when they receive negative feedback, and whether staff and partners feel they have the time to respond to the feedback received.

Management buy-in

Programme management buy-in was mixed across contexts. The OPTI team has had major change processes internally; however, there was clear management buy-in from its senior leadership, as the team anticipates rolling out the feedback mechanism to all its project areas. This senior management buy-in has ensured that the project is able to continue in Gaza as a result. In Lebanon, management buy-in was present at the start of the project, and both the programme teams and senior management have remained committed to ensuring that feedback receives timely responses. Programme teams sit with the MEAL team on a regular basis to review accountability data, and take decisions together on how best to ensure the mechanism works effectively.

Community awareness

According to post-distribution monitoring (PDM) surveys, communities reported an overall increase in their awareness of feedback mechanisms, especially in Lebanon, Iraq and Gaza. This was true to a lesser extent in Syria and Yemen, where the project has been active for a shorter length of time. Data from the Iraq PDM demonstrates a large positive shift in the community providing feedback. The data itself has changed to incorporate more nuanced questions on accountability since October 2016: the PDMs have consistently asked whether community members were aware of how to provide feedback, and if they had used the mechanisms. From March 2018, preferred types of communication channels for communities were also recorded, as was whether the communities had received responses to their feedback. The percentage of unresolved cases in Iraq decreased from 71% in December 2018 to 6% in 2019 (of community members reporting unresolved issues in the PDM).

In the PDM data in Iraq and Lebanon, communities felt more confident understanding what a response should look like, and therefore questions were added related to satisfaction with response times in Lebanon and Iraq. These teams now track community perceptions around response times. Overall, this measure has improved over time in these countries. Communities in Lebanon reported knowing how to ask focal points for assistance or how to provide feedback directly.

Staff attitudes towards accountability

All the MEAL teams (who oversee the feedback mechanism in their respective countries) felt that programme teams believed the feedback mechanism – and accountability more broadly – to be the responsibility of MEAL teams, rather than an organizational and integral country issue. Another key concern raised was MEAL staff turnover, especially of community-level staff. Often, those collecting feedback at field level are volunteers, paid minimal salaries but tasked with a high level of risk in order to access vulnerable, conflict-affected populations. It is difficult to ensure that they receive adequate training and stay with Oxfam in the long term. This makes it a challenge to ensure that the feedback mechanism works effectively at the field level. Even at a higher level in country teams, MEAL staff are often the first to be cut during change processes, which means that institutional memory on the feedback mechanism is lost.

However, the KAP survey results show positive shifts in overall changes in staff attitudes, perceptions and beliefs on accountability. This happened most notably in those countries that had been implementing the project for longer (Lebanon, Iraq and Gaza). For all countries, the baseline result for the question *'Have you received accountability training?'* was 57%. This was 67% in the endline (for which a wider range of staff were interviewed). It is also worth noting that a greater proportion of women answered 'yes' than previously in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq indicating that, as part of gender strategies for feedback mechanisms, more women have been hired as data collectors/frontline feedback staff to ensure other women feel more comfortable reporting their experiences.

The baseline result on the understanding of accountability among staff and partners was 77% reporting a 'good' understanding and 11% an 'excellent' understanding. In the endline survey, this changed to 67% 'good' and 24% 'excellent'.

Staff capability

Data collectors – the frontline staff who receive feedback – reported feeling confident in inputting feedback data. Across all countries, there was an increased capture of feedback, including negative feedback. This demonstrates that staff did not feel inhibited in reporting negative feedback.

Partners in Iraq also appreciated how at the front-end of the system, feedback pathways are clear. However, partners in several countries have raised the issue that they still do not directly undertake data or case management.

Inclusivity of feedback mechanisms and representation of different groups

Although more than 60% of staff and partners in Lebanon, Iraq, Gaza and Yemen reported that the feedback mechanism was accessible to communities, issues of inclusivity varied from country to country. In general, all teams used the Power BI dashboards and feedback data to reiterate that there were gaps in reaching women and people with disabilities.

Adapting feedback mechanisms

All teams have adapted their communications channels to ensure that communities are aware of the feedback mechanisms, and have adapted the feedback channels offered to ensure that they are accessible to as many communities as possible. Inclusivity remains a challenge in contexts where security is a concern – notably Iraq, Yemen, Gaza and Syria.

All teams have done detailed scoping exercises to better understand the communities in which they work. The teams in Gaza and Iraq, for example, have carried out vulnerability assessments to ensure that specific types of vulnerable populations and their needs are included in the design of communication channels. The Lebanon team has done extensive work, such as interviews with community members, training focal points and door-to-door communications, to ensure that vulnerable populations can access the feedback mechanism.

Teams have adopted many approaches to integrate different community views and voices into the feedback mechanism – and ultimately programming. The Iraq, Lebanon and Gaza teams have developed specific strategies, e.g. vulnerability assessments, to ensure that vulnerable groups' needs are understood and integrated into feedback collection and responses.

Gathering feedback from more types of people

Several country teams reported that they face restrictions imposed by the authorities on the ability of MEAL teams to operate and reach vulnerable population groups, including women. For example, the Yemen team has faced security concerns around access, and has found it difficult to reach women in public spaces. In Syria, direct access to communities is limited (and is only possible during distributions), and cannot be done independently. Further, the use of mobile phones to collect data is not permitted in Syria. Similarly, the Yemen and Gaza teams cannot freely use mobile phones or mobile-based data collection in their work. Teams are required to undergo an extensive approval and authorization process with local authorities; clear guidelines are not in place for many project locations.

Despite these challenges, women's inclusion in feedback data remained high in Syria and Lebanon. As of June 2018, Iraq's feedback from women was 27%, which matches the national figure from the UN Office

for Project Services (UNOPS), demonstrating that Oxfam's gender-disaggregated feedback data is in line with country averages. Iraq has reported an increase in single-women-headed households using the feedback mechanism.

Most teams have used the data to adapt communication channels to improve targeting for women. For example, the Yemen team has adapted its help desk structures and timings to ensure that women can attend them at distribution sites to provide feedback. Women tend to not use phones; therefore, teams have deployed a female helpline operator to encourage women to call, as it is common for women to hang up if a man answers the phone. This makes the helpline more accessible for women who feel more comfortable calling knowing that a woman will answer. There are numerous other examples of gender strategies, and outreach strategies adopted by country teams, to ensure that the feedback mechanism is accessible and safe for the varied needs of the communities in which we work.

Coordination internally and between agencies

Internal coordination

Staff and partners reported that, overall, the project helped improve internal coordination. While most country teams had pre-existing feedback mechanisms, the ICT platforms used for this project facilitated greater coordination. Even centrally within Oxfam, it was easy to compare data across the region and internationally. This allowed for regional data to be shared during the learning event, at which country teams could view other teams' headline data and provide feedback on trends across the region.

External coordination

Country teams had different systems for inter-agency referrals, and different levels of inter-agency coordination in their countries. Power BI dashboards and feedback were being shared and used between agencies in some countries. For example, Lebanon and Iraq use the dashboards for formal inter-agency coordination groups (such as the UNHCR-led Protection Cluster); and the Gaza team uses the dashboards bilaterally with the World Food Programme (WFP).

Oxfam has been praised for its leadership on accountability, especially this project model, in multiple countries. In Lebanon, a UN agency described the system as the most effective one they had seen in use, and asked about its possible replicability across the Protection Cluster. In Iraq, UNOPS has consulted with Oxfam about rolling out standard operating procedures (SOPs) for a feedback mechanism. In Syria, the MEAL team has been asked to support inter-agency coordination mechanisms on rolling out a similar feedback mechanism.

All the country teams use their feedback to coordinate with other agencies, ensuring that they are aware of the feedback being raised by communities. For example, in Lebanon, there is strong coordination with

UN agencies, such as UNHCR, on protection. In Gaza, there is humanitarian coordination with the WFP and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. In Iraq, feedback supports the work of UNOPS on coordinating accountability. In Yemen, coordination is difficult, but Oxfam has been approached about its feedback data for southern Yemen.

Use of data nationally and regionally to inform broader programming

Programme changes have taken place, albeit mainly at an operational level. Some broader strategies and changes in programming have been incorporated into future programme design. There is still a challenge to incorporate feedback into regional programming, although several suggestions were raised during the learning event (see Table 1).

Table 1: Programme changes resulting from feedback

Country	Changes made	Ideas for improvement
Yemen	• Re-selection of community committees. • Changed water distribution points and processes to determine future water distribution points, following feedback from the community.	• Ensuring that committees are selected transparently in the future.
Iraq	• Changed the way in which hygiene kits are distributed through vouchers, and how asset replacement is conducted. • Ensured accountability is explicitly integrated into routine monitoring activities, and other non-MEAL activities. • The feedback database is now an actively used source to ensure community lists are accurate. • Integrated triangulation to ensure selection criteria are relevant, and project interventions reach the intended communities.	
Syria	• Received several complaints about the quantity and quality of public health promotion distributions, so changed the quality and type of soap and shampoo; held short focus group discussions to validate the changes.	• Could change a water distribution site based on feedback related to requests for assistance.
Gaza	• Used unrestricted funding to fund research on determining new vulnerability criteria, based on changes in Gaza.	

Lebanon	• Created a tracking sheet linking service provision data with feedback received about underserved areas.	
	• After noticing that location data was not reaching the final database, ensured that future service provision was better linked to location data.	

The project had an unintended consequence: greater awareness and use of data protection and data privacy protocols for the people Oxfam works with, in line with commitments to responsible data and data rights[5] that focus on upholding the rights and dignity of people through the information we collect about them. The project has become the model for country-wide coordination on accountability and feedback.

Future plans and organizational buy-in

Beyond the HIF-funded components of this project, the methodology and system have been adopted in four further countries (including a Category 1 emergency, Cyclone Idai in Mozambique), and are now part of Oxfam's corporate objective commitments to scale up globally. The initiative has received internal investment and has kick-started the development of new partnerships, as well as work alongside peers, partners, networks and other stakeholders to align with other initiatives and learning opportunities.

The first step of the investment has been to expand the methodology and conduct human-centred design research on the reporting of misconduct. This is so Oxfam can holistically understand the varying gaps, barriers and needs relating to perceptions of and experiences with reporting misconduct among community members and field staff. This work is contributing to the wider Your Word Counts[6] programme, which will continue beyond this funding opportunity to deliver better feedback mechanisms that are safe, confidential and trustworthy, and that strengthen Oxfam's accountability to affected people.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Will the outcomes of this project continue beyond the end of the project without need for additional resources?

The outcomes of this project will continue beyond the end of the project. All country teams, except Syria, have arranged budgets to carry over subscriptions for SurveyCTO and Power BI. All have reaffirmed their commitment to accountability within the job descriptions of MEAL staff and future country programme planning. The Syria team remains in discussions over the feasibility of continuing to use the feedback mechanism in its current operating environment.

What are the key success factors in achieving long-term sustainability?

The key factors for the long-term sustainability of the programmes are:

- Ensuring clear **buy-in from management** and training that extends roles and responsibilities beyond MEAL and programme staff to engender a cross-cutting accountability culture.

- Taking a **holistic approach** before collecting feedback data. Be certain that teams are aware of their roles and responsibilities, and that there are clear pathways to ensure teams are ready to respond in place before collecting communities' feedback, so that there are no significant gaps or delays in providing a response to communities, which could undermine trust.

- Maintaining the smooth 'tech' side of the project, given that the flow of **mobile collection** into SurveyCTO, and the referral pathways and analysis in Power BI, work well.

- Considering the need to collect **information on disability** and the **viability of collecting this data** in certain contexts. Teams reported a need to carry out more extensive research on integrating the needs of people with disabilities into feedback mechanism designs.

- Including **partners – and ultimately communities – in the design process,** and ideally in the Power BI system, so that all stakeholders can have access to data concerning them. This also ensures that all stakeholders have ownership and ongoing buy-in to the aim of the feedback mechanism.

- Several country teams raised the need to be able to **share Power BI dashboards** with partners, donors and other agencies to help share data in real time.

- Having clear **alternative strategies** in place for countries in which Oxfam is unable to collect data using mobile phones or ICT. Many teams rely on paper-based systems followed by data entry in field or country offices. Risk assessments should be carried out by country teams to ensure that safe data protection policies are in place, and data collection remains context-sensitive.

- Developing **clear SOPs** for the feedback mechanism to ensure that new teams have straightforward guidelines based on lessons learned.

- Integrate **awareness on how to report safeguarding, misconduct and fraud issues** in all teams, but especially for frontline MEAL staff, who are often known and trusted by communities, and therefore receive feedback on these issues. Oxfam is currently undertaking research using human-centred design to better understand the barriers to reporting safeguarding, misconduct and fraud issues.

Box 2: The centrality of ICT for success

The ICT in Programme team[7] was integral to the project, a fact that was recognized by all the country teams. For example, the teams in Iraq and Lebanon mentioned that communication between them and the ICT team was clear and helpful. They reported that adjustments to the technology side (Power BI or specific SurveyCTO requirements) were made in the system directly. Similarly, the ICT in Programme team provided technical guidance on broader accountability issues, linking other countries' experiences and ensuring that communication was clear with senior country management

'The ICT4DEV team are like a wishbox, you make a wish and then the change happens in the system. We couldn't have done it without them!'

– Country MEAL Team during the Iraq learning event

What should be done differently in future projects?

Some considerations for future projects are:

- Teams reported benefitting from the learning event, as they had the ability to learn directly from peers on key challenges and successes, and had an opportunity to share their recommendations as a unified group. The teams highlighted the need for future sharing between MEAL teams and their desire to increase sharing.

- Accountability and feedback should be incorporated into logframes and project design to ensure that they are taken seriously by all programme teams.

- Project design teams should work with MEAL teams to ensure that the design of projects incorporates community feedback. A suggestion was made to ensure feedback is included in new donor funding applications as a requirement. Feedback requiring a broader strategic shift in programming should be incorporated into new project designs in the communities in which Oxfam works.

- Budgets for accountability should be included in future projects.

- Clear roles and responsibilities are needed in the design of the feedback mechanisms to ensure that programme staff are aware of their objectives.

- Accountability and feedback management should be incorporated into the job descriptions of programme staff as well as MEAL staff. If possible, they should also be included in senior management and upper line management job descriptions to ensure oversight.

- Strategies are needed to protect team welfare – especially frontline MEAL staff – during the collection, community awareness sessions and management of feedback. Sensitization and awareness of how to process difficult cases are needed. Staff are often at the frontline and become the 'faces' of community trust, so are critical resources. If responses are delayed or do not close cases, frontline staff often face pressure. More needs to be done to safeguard the well-being of frontline MEAL staff.

- Feedback can lead to uncovering power dynamics in communities, which can result in Oxfam changing the targeted location. Teams believe that investing in a power analysis is critical to understanding how accountability works in targeted communities.

- Adequate resourcing is needed for both accountability more broadly, and specific feedback mechanisms in-country. This includes hiring field staff with proper contracts and benefits with the intention of investing in the long term (i.e. not using community volunteers tasked with collecting extensive data). Furthermore, MEAL staff should not be cut as a first resort during staff change processes.

- Communities' information must be stored safely and appropriately. To do so, new procedures on safe programming and data protection must be developed, and existing guidelines/policies implemented. Further work is needed to clarify the differences between safeguarding, misconduct reporting, fraud reporting and feedback for programmes.

5 CONCLUSION

The Responsive Listening through Improved Feedback Mechanisms project provided an ICT platform alongside a methodology for country staff to roll out more effective and responsive feedback mechanisms. Overall, staff, partners and communities reported improved responsiveness, inclusiveness, coordination and programmatic changes as a result of this intervention. The approach and platforms will remain in use in all but one of the countries. The calibre and type of accountability data collected by country teams has markedly improved since the launch of the project, as have the results around feedback and responsiveness. A future scaling of the project will be possible, but will require country teams to have clear roles and responsibilities for programme staff on responsiveness before the launch of the feedback mechanism, to ensure that trust is not eroded. In general, the project will remain an effective platform to improve responsiveness and overall country-level accountability towards staff, partners and the communities in which Oxfam works.

ANNEX 1: EVALUATION TOR

Scope of the evaluation

- To collect data related to the project's outcome and impact indicators.

- To understand the positive and negative change that has occurred with project participants because of the project.

- To provide an opportunity for the project partners and project participants to reflect on and learn from what change has happened due to the project.

- To assess the replicability, scalability and effectiveness of the project.

The evaluation needs to measure

- The responsiveness of Oxfam's programming to feedback or complaints.

- Changes in the behaviour/attitude/confidence/perceptions (of staff, partners and community) on accountability and feedback.

- The inclusivity of the feedback mechanism and the representation of different groups.

- Coordination internally and between agencies.

- The use of data nationally and regionally to inform broader programming.

Evaluation questions

- Could this style of project be replicated and scaled up for other types of feedback management? If so, what are the key success factors? If the project cannot be replicated, what could be done differently in future projects?

- How effective is the use of mobile case management as a coordination tool, both internally between teams and externally between partners/agencies?

- What strategies were used to make this approach inclusive and appropriate for women, and were they successful? What could be done differently?

- Did this project positively contribute to achieving a culture of accountability and use of evidence within Oxfam and in our partners? If so, what are the key success factors? If not, what were the major barriers to achieving this culture?

- Will the outcomes of this project continue beyond the end of the project, without need for additional resources? If so, what are the key success factors in achieving long-term sustainability? If the project's outcomes will not continue, what should be done differently in future projects?

NOTES

1 For more on Elhra's work to improve humanitarian outcomes through research, innovation and partnership, visit www.elhra.org

2 C. Sheehan. (2016). *Humanitarian Informal feedback project: Za'atari Refugee Camp, Jordan. Evaluation report 2015/16*. Oxfam evaluation report. https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/humanitarian-informal-feedback-project-zaatari-refugee-camp-jordan-evaluation-r-620164

3 SurveyCTO webpage: https://www.surveycto.com/

4 PowerBI webpage: https://powerbi.microsoft.com/en-us/

5 Oxfam. (n.d.) *Responsible data management*. Webpage. www.oxfam.org.uk/responsibledata

6 Your Word Counts refers to the internal project in Oxfam seeking to use ICT to improve feedback mechanisms across Oxfam, and ultimately, accountability. The project was rolled out in the five countries in this report, as well as in Myanmar and Ethiopia.

7 For more information, see the ICT in Programme page on Oxfam's Policy & Practice website: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-approach/ict-in-programme

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