

CHAPTER

16

Accountability to Affected Populations

Strengthening Transparency, Participation, Responsiveness and Trust in Humanitarian and Development Programming

Dr Abenet Yohannes, Ph.D. | MEAL training series

What You Will Be Able To Do

By the end of this chapter, participants will be able to:

1 Explain the meaning and principles of accountability

3 Promote transparency and meaningful participation

5 Establish feedback-and-response mechanisms

7 Develop safeguarding and SEA reporting channels

9 Analyze feedback and use it to improve programming

2 Identify stakeholder information needs

4 Design community-engagement approaches

6 Manage complaints safely and confidentially

8 Create referral and escalation procedures

What Is Accountability?

Accountability is the commitment of an organization to:

- Explain its decisions and actions
- Meet agreed standards
- Respond to concerns
- Improve programmes based on evidence and feedback
- Use resources responsibly
- Listen to stakeholders
- Correct mistakes

Accountability in MEAL

Accountability is one of the four pillars of MEAL:

- **Monitoring:** Tracks progress

- **Evaluation:** Assesses relevance and results

- **Accountability:** Ensures answerability and responsiveness

- **Learning:** Uses evidence to improve decisions

Accountability to Affected Populations

AAP means ensuring that people affected by a project can:

- Access relevant information

- Participate in decisions

- Express concerns

- Submit complaints safely

- Receive timely responses

- Influence programme improvement

Who Are We Accountable To?

Organizations are accountable to:

● Project participants

● Affected communities

● Donors

● Government authorities

● Implementing partners

● Staff and volunteers

● Governing bodies

● The organization itself

Balancing Accountability

Stakeholder	Main Accountability Concern
Communities	Relevant, safe and quality services
Donors	Results, compliance and responsible use of funds
Partners	Clear roles and mutual commitments
Government	Alignment with laws and priorities
Organization	Policies, values and performance standards

Why Accountability Matters

Strong accountability contributes to:

● **Community trust**

● **Better programme quality**

● **Greater relevance**

● **Improved participation**

● **Early identification of risks**

● **Safeguarding**

● **Reduced fraud and misconduct**

● **Donor confidence**

● **Organizational learning**

Consequences of Weak Accountability

Weak accountability may result in:

● **Mistrust**

● **Exclusion**

● **Poor targeting**

● **Unresolved complaints**

● **Misinformation**

● **Safeguarding risks**

● **Misuse of resources**

● **Reputational damage**

● **Reduced programme effectiveness**

Core Principles of Accountability

● Transparency

● Participation

● Responsiveness

● Inclusion

● Accessibility

● Confidentiality

● Respect

● Do No Harm

● Non-retaliation

● Continuous learning

SECTION 1

Stakeholder Information and Transparency

01

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Stakeholder Information Needs

Different stakeholders require different information. Examples include:

● **Project objectives**

● **Eligibility criteria**

● **Available services**

● **Implementation schedules**

● **Participant rights**

● **Expected standards**

● **Complaint channels**

● **Project results**

Understanding Information Needs

Organizations should ask communities:

- What information do you need?

- In which language?

- Through which communication channel?

- What barriers may limit access?

- When do you need it?

- In what format?

- Who do you trust to provide information?

Transparency

Transparency means providing information that is:

● **Accurate**

● **Timely**

● **Clear**

● **Relevant**

● **Accessible**

● **Consistent**

● **Honest**

● **Appropriate to the audience**

Information Communities Should Receive

Communities should understand:

- Who is implementing the project

- Who is eligible

- What assistance is free

- How to provide feedback

- What support is available

- How beneficiaries are selected

- What staff conduct is expected

- How complaints will be handled

Information-Sharing Channels

Possible channels include:

● Community meetings

● Notice boards

● Posters and leaflets

● Local radio

● SMS

● Social media

● Help desks

● Hotlines

● Community representatives

● Home visits

Accessible Communication

Communication should consider:

● Local languages

● Literacy levels

● Disability inclusion

● Cultural norms

● Gender barriers

● Age differences

● Technology access

● Security and privacy risks

Common Communication Barriers

- Technical language

- Limited translation

- Inaccessible meeting locations

- Dependence on community gatekeepers

- Information shared too late

- Low literacy

- Exclusion of marginalized groups

- Lack of accessible formats

Good Information-Sharing Practice

Good practice

1 Use simple language

2 Repeat important messages

3 Use multiple channels

4 Verify that people understood

5 Update information when plans change

6 Provide contact details for questions

SECTION 2

Participation and Community Engagement

02

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Meaning of Participation

Participation means enabling affected people to influence:

● Needs assessment

● Priority setting

● Project design

● Targeting criteria

● Implementation

● Monitoring

● Evaluation

● Learning and adaptation

Levels of Participation

1

Inform provide information

2

Consult ask for opinions

3

Involve include people in activities

4

Collaborate make decisions together

5

Empower transfer decision-making authority

Meaningful Participation

Participation is meaningful when:

- Diverse groups are represented

- People understand the purpose

- Feedback is acknowledged

- Participation is not symbolic

- Participation is voluntary

- Views influence decisions

- No participant is placed at risk

Participation in Project Design

Communities can contribute to:

- Identifying priority needs

- Defining targeting criteria

- Choosing delivery methods

- Designing feedback channels

- Selecting interventions

- Identifying risks

- Setting indicators

Participation in Monitoring

Community participation in monitoring may include:

● **Community scorecards**

● **Joint monitoring visits**

● **Focus-group discussions**

● **Beneficiary committees**

● **Satisfaction surveys**

● **Participatory observation**

● **Public review meetings**

Community Engagement

Community engagement is the continuous process of:

● **Building relationships**

● **Sharing information**

● **Listening**

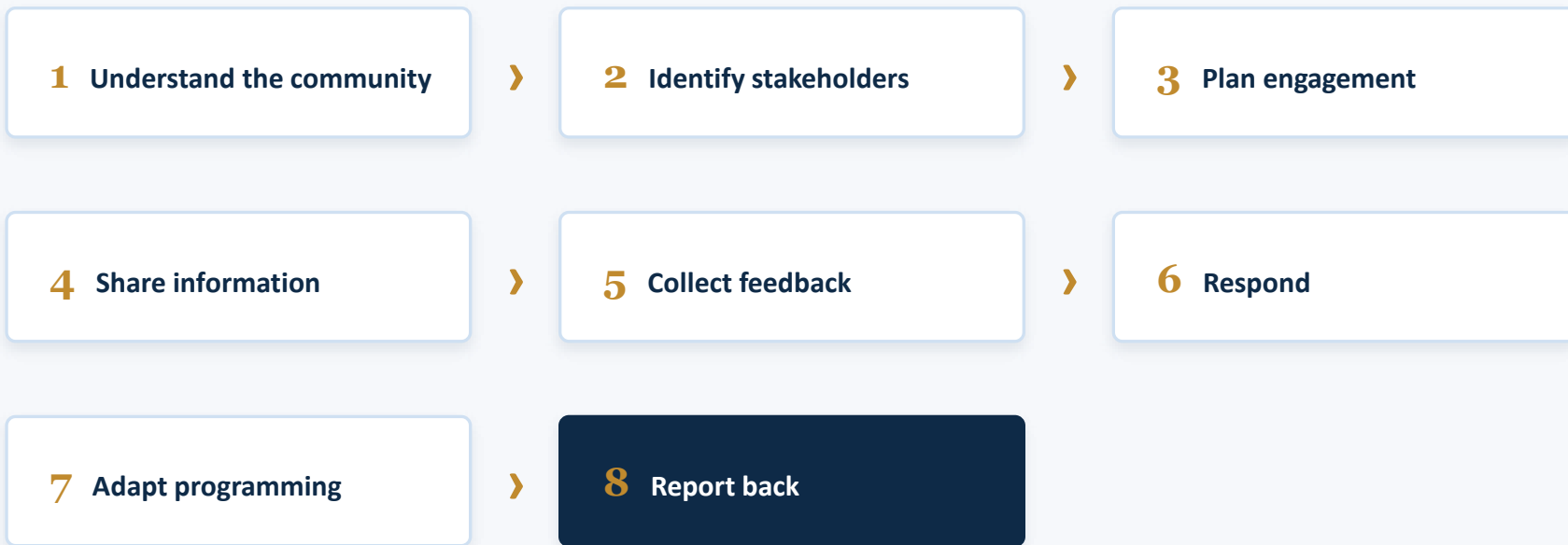
● **Consulting**

● **Responding**

● **Collaborating**

● **Maintaining trust**

Community-Engagement Cycle



Inclusion in Community Engagement

Special attention should be given to:

● **Women and girls**

● **Children and adolescents**

● **Older people**

● **Persons with disabilities**

● **Displaced populations**

● **Minority groups**

● **Remote communities**

● **People with low literacy**

Barriers to Participation

● **Fear of retaliation**

● **Social exclusion**

● **Power imbalances**

● **Language differences**

● **Disability barriers**

● **Distance**

● **Cultural restrictions**

● **Lack of trust**

● **Limited time**

● **Care responsibilities**

SECTION 3

Feedback-and-Response Mechanisms

03

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What Is a Feedback-and-Response Mechanism?

A structured system that allows people to:

- Ask questions

- Express satisfaction

- Submit complaints

- Receive an appropriate response

- Provide suggestions

- Raise concerns

- Report misconduct

Objectives of a Feedback Mechanism

An effective mechanism helps organizations to:

- Improve service quality

- Identify programme weaknesses

- Identify safeguarding risks

- Promote participation

- Strengthen trust

- Detect misconduct

- Correct misinformation

- Support adaptive management

Types of Feedback

Feedback may include:

● **Requests for information**

● **Suggestions**

● **Positive feedback**

● **Service complaints**

● **Staff-conduct complaints**

● **Fraud allegations**

● **Safeguarding concerns**

● **SEA allegations**

● **Urgent protection cases**

Feedback Intake Channels

Possible channels include:

● **Help desks**

● **Telephone hotlines**

● **SMS**

● **Email**

● **Suggestion boxes**

● **Community meetings**

● **Trusted focal persons**

● **Digital platforms**

● **In-person reporting**

● **Home visits**

Selecting Appropriate Channels

Feedback channels should be:

● **Accessible**

● **Safe**

● **Confidential**

● **Affordable**

● **Culturally appropriate**

● **Easy to understand**

● **Inclusive**

● **Reliable**

● **Available in local languages**

Multiple-Channel Approach

No single channel reaches everyone. A strong mechanism should combine:

● **Face-to-face channels**

● **Telephone channels**

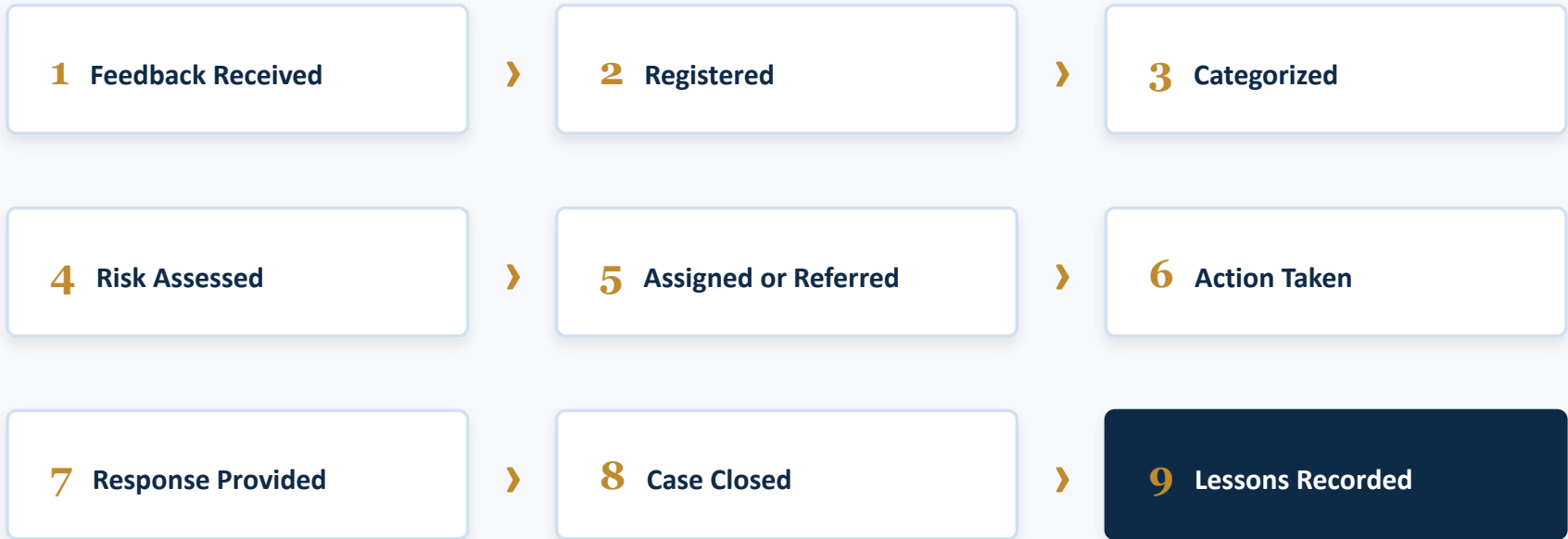
● **Written channels**

● **Digital channels**

● **Anonymous options**

● **Specialized confidential channels**

Feedback Mechanism Workflow



SECTION 4

Complaints-Handling Systems

04

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Complaints-Handling Process

1 Intake

3 Categorization

5 Referral or assignment

7 Response

9 Documentation

2 Registration

4 Risk assessment

6 Investigation or action

8 Closure

10 Learning

Complaint Categorization

Category	Example
Information request	Question about eligibility
Programme complaint	Delayed distribution
Staff conduct	Disrespectful behaviour
Fraud or corruption	Request for unofficial payment
Safeguarding	Abuse or exploitation concern
SEA	Sexual exploitation or abuse allegation
Protection	Immediate safety concern

Complaint Severity Levels

Low Risk

- Information request
- General suggestion
- Minor service issue

Medium Risk

- Repeated service failure
- Staff-conduct concern
- Exclusion complaint

High Risk

- Fraud
- Safeguarding
- SEA
- Violence
- Immediate protection risk

Confidential and Sensitive Complaints

Sensitive complaints require:

- Restricted access

- Confidential documentation

- Need-to-know information sharing

- Protection from retaliation

- Trained personnel

- Secure case files

- Immediate risk assessment

- Appropriate referral

Principles for Handling Sensitive Complaints

● Safety

● Confidentiality

● Respect

● Non-discrimination

● Informed consent

● Do No Harm

● Survivor-centred
response

● Timely referral

SECTION 5

Safeguarding and SEA Reporting

05

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Safeguarding Complaints

Safeguarding concerns may involve:

● Abuse

● Exploitation

● Neglect

● Harassment

● Violence

● Child-protection concerns

● Misuse of power

● Breach of the code of conduct

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

SEA complaints require specialized handling. Organizations should ensure:

- Confidential reporting channels

- Immediate internal referral

- Survivor-centred support

- Secure documentation

- Protection from retaliation

- Compliance with established procedures

SEA Reporting Channels

Possible reporting channels include:

- Safeguarding hotline

- Secure email

- In-person reporting

- Inter-agency reporting mechanism

- Dedicated safeguarding focal person

- Trusted community focal person

- Anonymous reporting option

What Staff Should Not Do

Staff receiving a sensitive complaint should not:

- Conduct an informal investigation

- Promise complete secrecy

- Confront the alleged perpetrator

- Delay referral

- Ask unnecessary questions

- Share information widely

- Blame the complainant

- Record unnecessary identifying details

Immediate Staff Response

When receiving a sensitive complaint:

1 Listen respectfully

3 Explain confidentiality limits

5 Obtain consent where required

7 Maintain secure documentation

2 Ensure immediate safety

4 Record only essential information

6 Refer through the correct pathway

SECTION 6

Referral and Escalation

06

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Referral Pathways

Referral pathways connect affected people to appropriate services. Examples:

● **Medical services**

● **Psychosocial support**

● **GBV services**

● **Child-protection services**

● **Legal assistance**

● **Security support**

● **Shelter**

● **Social services**

Principles of Referral

Referrals should be:

● Safe

● Timely

● Confidential

● Consent-based

● Survivor-centred

● Appropriate to the
case

● Made to qualified
providers

● Properly documented

Referral Pathway Components

A referral pathway should specify:

- Type of service

- Contact person

- Operating hours

- Referral procedure

- Confidentiality requirements

- Service provider

- Location

- Eligibility requirements

- Emergency contact

Escalation Procedures

Escalation should be based on:

● **Severity**

● **Immediate safety risk**

● **Safeguarding implications**

● **Fraud risk**

● **Legal implications**

● **Reputational impact**

● **Management involvement**

● **Urgency**

Response Timelines

Each organization should establish timelines aligned with its policies. Example:

Complaint Type	Indicative Response
Information request	Within 2 working days
Programme complaint	Within 5 working days
Staff-conduct complaint	Prompt review and assignment
Fraud allegation	Immediate escalation
Safeguarding concern	Immediate referral
SEA allegation	Immediate confidential referral

SECTION 7

Response, Closure and Learning

07

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Acknowledging Feedback

Acknowledgement should include:

- Confirmation of receipt

- Reference number where appropriate

- Expected response time

- Explanation of next steps

- Contact information

- Confidentiality information where relevant

Responding to Complaints

Responses should be:

● **Timely**

● **Respectful**

● **Accurate**

● **Clear**

● **Proportionate**

● **Confidential**

● **Documented**

● **Consistent with
policy**

Closing the Feedback Loop

Closing the loop means informing the complainant about:

- What action was taken

- What decision was reached

- Why the decision was made

- Whether the case is closed

- Available appeal options

- Any programme changes introduced

Case Closure Criteria

A case may be closed when:

- Required action has been completed

- Referral has been completed

- The complainant has been informed

- A response has been provided

- Resolution has been documented

- Any follow-up action has been assigned

Note: Sensitive cases may follow specialized closure procedures.

Feedback Analysis

Feedback should be analyzed by:

● **Type**

● **Location**

● **Project**

● **Intake channel**

● **Gender**

● **Age**

● **Disability**

● **Severity**

● **Response status**

● **Resolution time**

Feedback Reporting

Regular reports may include:

- Number of feedback cases received

- Channels used

- Percentage resolved

- Recurring concerns

- Categories of feedback

- Percentage acknowledged

- Average response time

- Programme changes made

Note: Confidential information must not be disclosed.

Feedback Dashboard Indicators

Possible indicators include:

- Percentage of communities aware of feedback channels
- Percentage of feedback acknowledged on time
- Percentage of complaints resolved
- Average resolution time
- Percentage of complainants satisfied
- Number of sensitive cases referred
- Number of programme changes based on feedback

Using Feedback to Improve Programming

Feedback can help organizations:

● **Adjust targeting**

● **Improve service quality**

● **Correct misinformation**

● **Strengthen staff conduct**

● **Remove access barriers**

● **Improve communication**

● **Identify protection risks**

● **Redesign activities**

Accountability and Adaptive Management

Feedback should inform:

● **Work-plan revisions**

● **Budget adjustments**

● **Staff coaching**

● **Risk mitigation**

● **Service-delivery changes**

● **Partner management**

● **Community-engagement strategies**

Roles and Responsibilities

Role	Responsibility
Programme Team	Address programme-related issues
MEAL Team	Manage, analyze and report feedback
Safeguarding Focal Person	Handle sensitive complaints
Management	Approve corrective action
ICT Team	Protect feedback data
Community Focal Point	Support access and referral

Feedback Register

A feedback register may contain:

● Case number

● Intake channel

● Location

● Assigned person

● Status

● Date received

● Category

● Risk level

● Action taken

● Closure date

Note: Sensitive personal information should be stored separately.

Data Protection in Feedback Systems

Protect feedback data through:

● **Role-based access**

● **Strong passwords**

● **Encryption**

● **Secure folders**

● **Confidential case codes**

● **Data-retention limits**

● **Secure disposal**

● **Staff confidentiality agreements**

Preventing Retaliation

Complainants must be protected from:

● **Threats**

● **Harassment**

● **Intimidation**

● **Loss of assistance**

● **Exclusion**

● **Discrimination**

● **Community pressure**

● **Workplace retaliation**

Anonymous Complaints

Anonymous complaints should be accepted where possible.

Advantages

- Reduces fear
- Supports reporting of sensitive issues
- Increases accessibility

Limitations

- Difficult to obtain clarification
- Difficult to provide direct responses
- May limit investigation

Common Weaknesses

- Only one feedback channel

- Delayed responses

- Lack of referral pathways

- Feedback collected but not analyzed

- Limited management oversight

- Low community awareness

- Poor documentation

- Weak confidentiality

- No closure communication

Characteristics of an Effective Mechanism

An effective mechanism is:

● **Accessible**

● **Safe**

● **Predictable**

● **Confidential**

● **Responsive**

● **Inclusive**

● **Transparent**

● **Documented**

● **Trusted**

● **Linked to decision
making**

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Design a Feedback-and-Response Mechanism

PE

Practical Exercise

Participants will design a complete mechanism covering:

● Intake channels

● Registration

● Categorization

● Referral

● Escalation

● Response

● Closure

● Reporting and learning

Exercise Scenario

A humanitarian project provides food assistance, cash support and protection services. Communities report:

- Limited information about eligibility
- Delayed distributions
- Disrespectful staff behaviour
- Requests for unofficial payments
- A confidential safeguarding complaint

Note: *Design an appropriate feedback-and-response mechanism.*

Step 1 — Select Intake Channels

Choose at least four channels. Consider accessibility for:

 **Women**

 **Persons with disabilities**

 **People with low literacy**

 **Remote communities**

 **Children**

 **People submitting sensitive complaints**

 **People wishing to remain anonymous**

Step 2 — Categorize Feedback

Develop categories for:

● Information requests

● Suggestions

● Positive feedback

● Programme complaints

● Staff-conduct complaints

● Fraud

● Safeguarding

● SEA

● Urgent protection concerns

Step 3 — Develop Referral and Escalation

For each category, define:

- Responsible person

- Escalation level

- Referral service

- Confidentiality requirement

- Required documentation

- Response timeline

Step 4 — Define Response and Closure

Specify:

- Acknowledgement method

- Investigation or review process

- Communication with the complainant

- Closure criteria

- Appeal process

- Satisfaction check

Exercise Output

Each group should produce:

1 Feedback-flow diagram

3 Complaint-classification table

5 Response-timeline matrix

7 Accountability indicators

2 Intake-channel matrix

4 Referral and escalation pathway

6 Closure checklist

Group Presentation Questions

- Are the channels accessible to marginalized groups?
- Are sensitive cases separated from routine complaints?
- Are roles and timelines clear?
- Is confidentiality protected?
- Can the organization close the feedback loop?
- How will feedback influence programme decisions?

CHAPTER REVIEW

Summary, Knowledge Check and Action Plan

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Chapter Summary

- Accountability strengthens trust and programme quality.

- Participation should influence decisions.

- Sensitive complaints require confidential handling.

- Closing the feedback loop is essential.

- Communities need timely and accessible information.

- Feedback mechanisms must be safe and inclusive.

- Referral pathways must be clear and functional.

- Feedback should lead to programme improvement.

Knowledge Check

1 What are the main principles of accountability?

3 What is meaningful participation?

5 How should sensitive complaints be handled?

7 What does closing the feedback loop mean?

2 What makes information sharing transparent?

4 What makes a feedback channel accessible?

6 What is the purpose of a referral pathway?

8 How can feedback improve programme quality?

Action Plan

Select one current project and assess:

- Are communities receiving sufficient information?

- Are feedback channels accessible?

- Are response timelines established?

- Is feedback used to improve programming?

- Are participation opportunities meaningful?

- Are sensitive complaints handled safely?

- Is feedback analyzed and reported?

Note: *Identify three priority improvement actions.*

KEY MESSAGE

Accountability is not only about receiving complaints.

It is about:

Informing

Listening

Responding

Protecting

Correcting

Learning

Improving

Thank You

Questions and Discussion

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