Feedback-and-response mechanism flowcharts

Feedback-and-response mechanism flowcharts (FRMs) are two-way communication processes designed to collect and respond to feedback from project participants and other stakeholders. Through the creation of communication loops, FRMs allow your project team to learn from stakeholder suggestions or concerns and respond in a timely and meaningful manner, demonstrating your accountability.

The Communication Cycle

Effective FRMs are critical to project success and accountability. A strong FRM system helps you gather information from stakeholders, and by providing a mechanism for you to identify and respond to their requests, FRMs also promote accountability in your project. In addition, FRMs provide a channel for stakeholders to report sensitive issues related to protection, exploitation, or fraud.

The key to a strong FRM is to make sure that communication flows in two directions through these two mechanisms: feedback mechanisms, meaning communities provide feedback to your project team through channels including meetings, suggestion boxes, and hotlines; response mechanisms, when your team acknowledges receipt of feedback and provides appropriate responses to the community. When designing FRMs, your team should consult with communities to identify their preferred means of feedback and response. It is advantageous to use mechanisms based on what is already working in the community and to look for existing mechanisms to build on. In fact, every decision you make should be based on the local context, considering issues of literacy, cell coverage, and cultural norms of communication.

How to design FRMs

Let's now look at how an FRMs is constructed. A feedback and response flowchart includes all the information you need, including how feedback will be collected, who will receive it, how it will be processed and used, and how the project will respond to the feedback. To make sure the processes and responsibilities are clear, the FRM should be constructed by answering five questions:

- How will feedback be collected?

Consult with community members to identify collection mechanisms that are both appropriate to the project context and effective in gathering useful feedback. Also, remember to document feedback that is shared informally during visits.

- Who receives feedback?

You will need to identify and train at least one person who is designated to manage stakeholder feedback, becoming the FRM focal point. You may also need to designate more than one FRM focal point based on the different types of feedback. The important thing is that the focal points are strong advocates for the process and that their responsibility in the process is well defined from the beginning.

- How is feedback processed?

You will need to establish clear, formal, and transparent internal procedures for processing feedback, defining who on your team has the authority to respond to inquiries, investigate a complaint, report a grievance, etc. In addition, it is important that you define how often feedback will be processed and by whom.

- How is feedback used?

Feedback should be used to inform the project at all decision-making stages. The advantage of using a formal FRM system is that the feedback collected is a valuable contribution to your overall data collection effort. The data can be used and considered during project coordination and planning meetings.

- How does the project respond to feedback?

Remember that it is important to respond to all feedback received. In some cases, this will only require an acknowledgment of receipt; in others, the response may be ongoing and complex. The most important aspect is that the response mechanism is appropriate to both the feedback and the context to which you are going to respond. This is especially true in sensitive situations where corruption, harassment, or sexual exploitation is reported, and where stakeholders' rights must be respected and protected by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

After answering these five questions, you will need time to properly document your FRM process to make it easily communicable to stakeholders. Among the many ways to document an FRM is the flowchart, which delineates how feedback is gathered, how information is processed and used, and how the project responds to communities (and individuals). When you have documented your FRM project, it is important that you create specific and clear instructions on how communities will be able to access and use the FRM, this can be done through training sessions to make the process and use of the FRM clear to everyone.

Communications plan

An important purpose of M.E.A.L. planning is to communicate information clearly. In fact, your project team will need to be clear about who should receive M.E.A.L. updates, what information they need, and when they need it. The primary tool for this purpose is the communication plan.
Keep in mind, however, that some projects have an overall project communication plan (not just the M.E.A.L.), so if this is the case, make sure that all M.E.A.L. information flows into the overall communication are documented in the right way.

Components of the Plan

Some communications are structured and formal, such as donor reporting and sharing mid-term evaluation reports with local governments. Other communications are informal and ongoing, such as regular community meetings with project participants and partners.

Target stakeholder	Information needs	Communication methods	Timing and frequency

In the table above you can see the components of the communication plan, let's now go through them one by one: In the first column, you will find the Target Stakeholders, i.e., who need to be informed about M.E.A.L. activities and receive communications from them. It is quite common for a project to have a multitude of stakeholders, who have different information needs (and communication preferences), and who will require to be informed in the way they feel is most appropriate for themselves.

Then, you will find the Information Needs (or Purpose), representing what each stakeholder needs to know. These information needs include project goals and objectives; access to and use of feedback and response mechanisms; project progress, changes, and updates; and results of learning efforts. In the third column, you will meet the Communication Methods, which informs about how the information will be distributed. The most effective methods are usually those identified in conjunction with the intervention community (e.g., taking into consideration the levels of literacy or technology in the intervention context). Also, you may need more than one method of communication because your stakeholders may have different needs (donors vs. community).

In the last column, instead, you will find the Frequency/Timing, which indicates how often information will be spread. In fact, all communications should be planned in alignment with the team and the overall project implementation schedule to ensure there is time to communicate effectively.

Promoting Accountability to Stakeholders

You will need to ensure that your communication plan addresses all stakeholders who need information from the project. This will push you to focus the plan on promoting accountability to funders and should also ensure that you are communicating in ways that promote accountability to communities and partners, updating them on the progress of your project activities. Clear communication with stakeholders ensures that your project will be: transparent, as effective communication with communities ensures that they have access to information in a timely manner. This can only be done by ensuring that information is provided in multiple languages and with culturally relevant formats for each stakeholder group.

Clear communication, then, can only be done through a participatory approach. You will need to establish more inclusive channels to promote ongoing dialogue between your project team and various stakeholders, reinforcing community engagement in programming. Finally, a well-thought-out communication plan will make your project responsive, which means it will make you responsive to the information needs of communities, partners, and other stakeholders. Be sure, however, to consult with your key users and stakeholders to determine when and in what form they would like to receive information.

Now that we have also introduced and analyzed the second accountability planning tool in the M.E.A.L. system, it's time to move on to the third and final tool: the learning plan, which is about the overall culture of the project, that is, encouraging you and the stakeholders to critically reflect on what you are doing.

Learning Plan

When we talk about learning in the context of M.E.A.L., we are referring to having a "culture" that encourages critical and intentional reflection. It is important to know how to intentionally manage this learning in order to take full advantage of its benefits. Your team will need to be able to consistently translate what they've learned from the experience into better practices for the project. One of the reasons for which learning is particularly important in development and humanitarian relief projects is that the work often takes place in dynamic environments of instability and transition, so conditions can change and affect programs. There are three main aspects of project learning that you will need to know in order to develop a good plan.

Adaptive Management

Adaptive Management is an approach used to make decisions and adjust the project in response to new information and changes in context. To ensure that projects are effective, your team will need to be able to adapt to changes in the context and quickly collect new information to update what was already planned. The ability to adapt requires an environment that promotes intentional learning and a flexible design that minimizes barriers to changing projects. This is referred to as adaptive management, which focuses primarily on project learning.

Organizational Learning

When we talk about organizational learning we refer to the process by which your organization discovers and adapts to new knowledge. It is structured around three concepts, all intrinsically linked to M.E.A.L. processes: knowledge creation, that is, new knowledge is created by combining new information with existing knowledge; knowledge transfer, which refers to the fact that an organization does not learn until knowledge is transferred throughout the agency.

Transfer can occur person-to-person (e.g., conversations, staff meetings) and through knowledge platforms that are used to share documented information; and knowledge retention, which refers to the fact that organizational learning occurs when new knowledge is incorporated into project-level processes and activities. This is why the M.E.A.L. system is circular so that a process of incorporating learning into the work of the organization is sustained.

Sectoral Learning

In addition, the M.E.A.L. system can contribute to sector learning, that is, learning within a particular subject area or sector. To do this, there are several methods; one can use traditional methods of sharing information, through the publication of evaluation reports, white books, or documentation with guidelines and best practices; or one can use digital platforms to share project learning with the sector.

If you are interested in knowing more about project writing and evaluation, and would like to have the assistance of professionals, you can email us at ssr@signis.net. At SIGNIS Services Rome we are experts in the sector and have been involved in project writing for the creation and development of communications projects all over the world for decades.

*This content was curated by Valeria Appolloni and inspired by the materials published on Kaya, published for non-commercial and educational use.

SIGNIS
SERVICES ROME