Part 3 — Feedback and Complaints Mechanisms

2020

CSO Accountability in Focus

Accountable Now

How did our members score?

2.4 / 4

Out of the ten member reports reviewed in 2019

This average was calculated using the scores given by the IRP when reviewing member accountability reports. For more information please read our reporting framework.

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) -national and international- are entities that carry out a wide range of activities: from being service providers all the way to advocating for people's human rights or building active citizenship. To be able to carry these tasks out, CSOs need to engage with a variety of people such as beneficiaries, donors, governments, among others and each one of these, experiences the actions undertaken by CSOs from a unique perspective.

It is through these processes of such engagement, that the people CSOs aim to work with and for might not be happy with the results or with how they were treated or they were not satisfied with the service they received. This is the primary reason why **feedback and complaints mechanisms** are essential: CSOs need to hear from their stakeholders to make sure that they are doing their work with integrity and in the most effective way.

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A feedback and complaint mechanism is an institutionalized mechanism that gives the people CSOs work for and with and any other stakeholder the opportunity to:

Be heard

Be heard about any feedback they might have about activities, actions, programmes being carried out by a CSO.

Report

Report cases of misconduct, and for organizations to deal with these complaints in a structured manner.

Response

Provide a response back to the feedback or complaint provider and when appropriate, to the wider community.

Influence

Trigger action and influence decision-making processes within the organization.

Analyse

Analyse feedback and complaints so that these can be used to course correct how an organisation has been carrying out certain tasks and make relevant policy/procedure changes.

A well-functioning complaints and feedback mechanism is the first stepping stone an organisation should take if they wish to strengthen their accountability in a dynamic way. These mechanisms are the first window that people can visit to interact with CSOs, hold them to account and ask them to take responsibility for their actions. A mix of mechanisms, online and offline, can ensure CSOs are aware of their stakeholders' thoughts about their work and can respond accordingly.

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In more serious cases, such as incidents of abuse, harassment, discrimination, etc., a sound complaints mechanism will allow CSOs to take action and track any broader trends. In general, complaints and feedback mechanisms improve communication and trust with stakeholders – both external and internal.

Feedback vs. Complaints

Feedback is any positive and negative remark that a person has about a specific action, programme, event, among others. It has the purpose of influencing how things are carried out, either to encourage CSOs to continue in the same direction or to ask them to change something for improvement sake. On the other hand, a complaint refers to a grievance from anyone who feels that they have been affected by an action or activity carried out by the organisation. Complaints can relate to sensitive or non-sensitive issues. It is important to differentiate between these because the way in which CSOs respond to and treat the information they receive should be different.

Accountable Now regards a sound feedback and complaints mechanism as the key accountability requirement for all our members. Offline mechanisms such as suggestion boxes, survey forms, focus group discussions, or in-person incident reporting are essential and are mostly likely the mechanism that an organisation's primary constituents will use. However, when assessing our members' mechanisms our starting point is their feedback and complaints policy and online submission mechanisms.

An organisation's website is the first port of call for information about any aspect of their work, as well as on how to provide feedback. Having information about feedback and complaints on the website is indicative of both transparency and the organisation's openness to listening and responding to their stakeholders.

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What should an online complaints mechanism look like?

In a nutshell, organisations should have:

A complaints policy which defines what constitutes a complaint, points to relevant principles or policies the organisation has agreed to abide by and can be held accountable against (e.g. code of conduct, safeguarding policy), includes the steps and timeframe for handling complaints, and points to submission channels.

Submission mechanism(s) and complaints policy are **easily found on the website.** This might mean creating a dedicated feedback and complaints webpage, and including links to it in other parts of the website, such as the "contact us" and "accountability" pages. Ideally organisations will include a link on the website's homepage, e.g. through a "complaints" button in the navigation bar.

Separate mechanisms for different stakeholders or situations, such as a child-friendly mechanism with simpler language or a whistleblower mechanism specifically for staff to raise serious issues.

A dedicated submission form and/or email address for complaints that is separate from the general info@ address.

A communications strategy that **promotes the mechanisms** and actively invites people to use them.

How are Accountable Now's members mechanisms?

When reviewing our Members' accountability reports submitted in 2019, we can say that every member has a complaint mechanism but not all of these go beyond the minimum benchmark and because of this, it is seen as one of the areas where there is significant room for improvement.

To assess members' complaints, we use our best practices highlighted below. In addition, as part of our reporting framework, we ask our members to reflect on how they listen to and involve and empower stakeholders. To do so, we ask them to answer the following questions:

1

What avenues do you provide your stakeholders to provide feedback to you? What evidence demonstrates that key stakeholder groups acknowledge your organisation is good at listening and acting upon what you heard?

2

What processes and mechanisms does your organisation have in place to handle external complaints including those relating to unacceptable conduct of your staff, volunteers, or partner organisations?

3

How are internal complaints handled, how many did the organisation receive and how were these handled?

4

What are the main likes/dislikes you have received from key stakeholders? How, specifically, have you reacted to their feedback?

These questions ensure that we understand the types of mechanisms that our members have and how the feedback and complaints are being handled.

To assess how our members are handling feedback and complaints, we looked at our 23 full members mechanisms (including those whose reports were not reviewed in 2019) and came to the following conclusions:

11 organisations have information about their complaints policy and a dedicated submission mechanism on their websites.

5 members have a dedicated email address or other online submission mechanism, but have not included a link to their complaints policy or provided information about the complaints process.

7 of our members do not have a dedicated complaints channel or information about their complaints mechanism on their website – most of these use a general “contact us” email or form.

Two organisations that have strong complaint mechanisms are SOS Children's Villages and CARE International.

SOS Children's Villages has separate mechanisms to report concerns relating to safeguarding, fraud and corruption, child sponsorships and other feedback. All of the information about SOS' various feedback mechanisms is easily accessible on their website.

Their safeguarding mechanism is available in six languages and has a separate submission form aimed at children, which uses language that speaks directly to them. It provides examples of what kind of behaviour to report and explains how to submit an anonymous report.

CARE International has an anonymous ethics line (hosted by a third party provider Ethicspoint) which allows for complaints submissions online or via phone, with support in over 100 languages. The mechanism is for any internal or external shareholder and detailed information is provided about efforts to keep complainants anonymous.

CARE's code of conduct is linked to the mechanism and also their complaints policy. People are asked to identify which category the complaint falls under which is useful to ensure that complaints are handled in a timely manner and that these are addressed by the right department.

How are Accountable Now's members reporting incidents?

In the past two years we have seen a significant increase in both the quality and visibility of complaints and feedback mechanisms on our members' websites, and in the number of organisations publishing incident data. **Currently 15 of our member organisations provide some data in their reports on the complaints they have received.** The detail of this data varies.

Some members focus on safeguarding/ **serious incident data** only, while others include complaints relating to other issues such as fundraising and general programme complaints.

Some include data on **complaints** from internal or external stakeholders only, while others report on both.

Some simply state the **number of incidents** reported and resolved, whereas others include more information on the categories of complaints, types of people involved, and the actions taken to resolve the incidents.

Finally, some of our members reported that they had not received any complaints in the reporting period, which may indicate that their stakeholders are not aware of or feel comfortable using the reporting mechanisms. This requires further investigation, and is something these members are looking into.

In line with this strengthened focus on and transparency around complaints mechanisms, we are increasingly seeing our members use the complaints and feedback they receive to reflect, learn and to strengthen organisational practices. This is key for regaining trust and demonstrating accountability in the context of the declining trust in CSOs and shrinking civic space.

How should organisations report on the complaints they receive?

Beyond establishing a complaints policy and mechanism, it is equally important to communicate what information was received and what has been done with it. In the past couple of years, we have observed an increasing number of CSOs (not only our members) publishing incident data on their websites or in their accountability reports. In order to be truly transparent and accountable CSOs need to publish timely, comprehensive, and useful information to provide an overview of:

The most common issues/topics received: e.g. safeguarding, harassment/ bullying, financial misconduct, communications. This allows people to understand the level of importance or severity of the complaint.

Learnings and further actions to prevent future cases such as staff trainings and amending institutional processes or policies. This shows a commitment to improvement and to protecting internal and external stakeholders.

Where the complaints were received: national, regional or international levels. This information allows members to pinpoint where the organisation might need to review processes and procedures.

The type of actions taken to resolve complaints: this can include warnings, disciplinary action, dismissal, etc. This information demonstrates that cases are taken seriously and are being dealt with.

The number of cases reported, substantiated, and closed.

This information should be updated at least on an annual basis to remain timely and allow people to compare data from year to year. A current best practice is Oxfam International's extremely comprehensive approach to incident reporting:

Oxfam UK has a feedback and complaints webpage with policy documents outlining the process and timelines for dealing with complaints. In annual learning reports, they summarise complaints received and action taken in response.

Oxfam International has a page dedicated to their 10-Point Action Plan to strengthen safeguarding and to transform organisational culture. The page includes safeguarding data including number of cases reported, the number closed or carried into the next year, what broad issues the cases relate to, a breakdown of complaints/survivors and subjects/perpetrators (staff, beneficiaries, community members, etc) and the action take to respond to the cases (disciplinary action, dismissals, etc.).

For a more detailed exploration of good practices around incident reporting, please see this paper.

Recommendations

How can CSOs improve their complaints and feedback mechanisms?

Make sure complaints and feedback policies and submission forms or contact information are available and **easily accessible online**

Actively and regularly **promote** the mechanisms to encourage their use by stakeholders

Report on aggregated incident data including number and type of cases, type of people involved, and if and how they have been dealt with

Explain how the learnings from these cases are being used to strengthen organisational processes and help prevent future incidents

Going forward, Accountable Now will continue to work with our members to improve their complaints and feedback mechanisms. Our aim is for all of our members to have key information about their mechanisms – including how to use them and data on reports received – on their websites, so that we can advance to more reflective exchanges about their use, the insights they reveal about members' work, and how to improve.

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