Christian Aid Guidelines:
Complaints and Response Mechanisms (CRM)

These guidelines have been developed as a practical field tool to support staff and partners in developing and implementing complaints and response mechanisms within their projects.

Goals:
1. **The organisation has consulted community members on the design of the complaints and response mechanism (CRM)**
2. **The CRM has been disseminated to the community in a variety of ways and is accessible to vulnerable and marginalised groups**
3. **The majority of beneficiaries know how to make a complaint and are aware of the response process**
4. **The community feels confident about making a complaint and feeling heard**
5. **Complaints make a difference to the programme**

Why run a complaints and response mechanism?

Accountability is a two way process involving the right to have a say and the duty to respond. Christian Aid is committed to ensuring that the beneficiaries of our programmes have the right to raise complaints and provide feedback on the work that we support.

Creating a channel through which communities can register their concerns ***increases transparency*** and demonstrates an agency's commitment to listening to its beneficiaries.

Sometimes beneficiaries feel unable to complain through informal or traditional means because of fear of retaliation, lack of knowledge, opportunity or trust. Having a formal mechanism that is ***confidential, safe and accessible*** will provide a means of raising concerns that could range from simple queries about beneficiary selection to more serious cases of fraud, inefficiency and abuse of power.

A mechanism can also be a useful source for ***learning and improvement*** for current and future projects, where complaints can be used as an indicator that a plan is not working as intended, enabling timely changes to be made to enhance the effectiveness of the project.

What we expect

Christian Aid expects partners to put a complaints and response mechanism with the following components in place:
- Clear directions on how to submit a complaint
- Assurance on confidentiality of the complaint
- Clear parameters on which complaints can be handled by the agency
- Procedures and steps within the agency for handling the complaint
- Information on when the complainant can expect a response
- How the complainant can appeal if they are unsatisfied with the response
- The process of safe referral of complaints the agency is not equipped to handle

How to do it

The following 6 key stages will help you establish and run an effective complaints and response mechanism.

Step 1. Build staff awareness of and commitment to complaints handling

Staff commitment to manage a complaints and response mechanism is a critical factor for success. Use ***team discussions and awareness-raising materials*** to build staff understanding and appreciation of the importance of complaints and establish the reasons why the agency wants to have a CRM.

Steps 2 and 3 should be carried out with consultation from both beneficiary representatives and staff in order to take account of local context and existing informal practices

Step 2. Think about your external parameters

WHAT? Define ***what constitutes a valid complaint*** that the agency will handle. Analyze with communities and staff the types of complaints that could be raised against the agency and its activities. Produce a complaints map of relevant types of complaints received, potential complainants and the sensitive nature of each complaint.
WHO? Decide ***who will have access*** to the CRM and why. Agencies will not be able to handle complaints by all stakeholders so identify who will be most affected by the agency's work (e.g. direct beneficiaries, potential beneficiaries, host communities, agency staff, other NGOs).
HOW? Decide ***through which entry points*** both sensitive and non-sensitive complaints can be lodged. The system needs to take into consideration, and be responsive to: language; literacy; numeracy; the needs, protection and access concerns of women, children, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. Entry points could be in the form of mobile phones, complaints boxes, village 'complaints and compliments' books, tape recorders, verbal conversations, formal letters etc. The ***minimum information required*** to submit a complaint should also be decided upon.

Step 3: PROCESS - Develop your internal complaints-handling procedures

The CRM needs to ***be clear and documented***. It can be simple, but it must be realistic and feasible to follow. It can be based on existing local mechanisms if these are thought appropriate.
WHO? Define ***the roles, responsibilities, structure and composition*** of the group of agency staff that will handle complaints, as well as a secondary body where appeals would be referred to.
WHEN? ***Procedures and timelines*** must be drawn up on how and when complaints will be verified, investigated and decisions delivered to complainants.

Step 4: INFORMATION – Disseminate the complaints handling procedure

It is vital that beneficiaries AND staff can access and understand the complaints-handling procedure.

Carry out an awareness campaign. Make information regarding how the mechanism works easily available using a variety of methods (different media, simplified texts etc) to increase reach (refer also to CA Guidelines on Information Sharing. A strategic dissemination of the procedure, e.g. rolling it out at one project site at a time may help to slowly ***build up agency capacity to handle complaints***, and allow for the procedure to be tested.

Step 5: MONITORING – Process all complaints according to the documented procedures

A complaints-handling procedure will become legitimate and trusted only if the procedure is seen to be followed strictly.

- Check regularly that complaints submitted are being processed properly.
- Track investigations into the complaints received and follow up actions that need to be taken by the assigned staff.
- Make sure all complaints receive a response.
- Be consistent and ensure that similar complaints receive a similar response.
- Talk to members of the community. Do they have the confidence to make a complaint? Do they understand how the procedure will work?

Step 6: ANALYSIS – Make use of complaints data

Complaints data should be used to ***inform programme management*** and to guide or revise the general information provided to beneficiaries. ***Collect statistics and review trends*** in the types of complaints received. Identify the opportunities and mechanisms to ***feed learning into future decision making*** processes and projects.