

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY HELPS TO TACKLE CORRUPTION IN MALAWI

How Malawi Red Cross Society used community engagement to tackle corruption by community leaders as part of the Cyclone Idai flood response.

Introduction

The Malawi Red Cross Society (MRCS) has a long history of working directly with communities, both in emergencies and to improve their health and well-being. In 2018, the National Society started the process of strengthening and institutionalizing a more systematic approach to community engagement and accountability as a means of improving transparency, increasing community participation in programme design and to ensure any feedback and complaints would be heard, responded to and acted upon.

Following a training in 2018 at the National Society headquarters, MRCS appointed their head of planning, quality and learning as the CEA focal point and integrated community engagement and accountability commitments into their 2019-2021 strategic plan. The National Society also helped to field test the new IFRC Feedback Starter Kit and volunteered to be one of four field visits for the research process to develop a roadmap to strengthen community engagement and accountability across Africa.



Community awareness sessions in Zomba

During this field visit, focus group discussions with community members and volunteers identified cultural barriers, which were hindering the National Society's efforts to be more accountable to communities. Community members described established practices of favouritism within the community, whereby community leaders would replace those on distribution lists with the names of their relatives. In addition, giving negative feedback is not culturally acceptable in Malawi, making it difficult for MRCS to engage community members during programme design and ensure they feel willing and safe to bring cases of corruption to the National Society's attention.

In March 2019 when Cyclone Idai caused widespread flooding across Malawi, the National Society integrated strong community engagement and accountability approaches into their emergency response. By ensuring people understood what they should receive and why, and having confidential and easily accessible feedback systems, MRCS made sure the community could identify when corruption was taking place and feel safe and justified to report this to the National Society. This case study documents how MRCS used community engagement and accountability approaches to prevent corruption, build trust with communities and ensure the most vulnerable received the support they were entitled to.

Community engagement and accountability within the flood response

The MRCS three-month flood response operation, funded through Danish Red Cross, UKAID, ECHO and DFID, provided affected families in different IDP camps in Chikwawa, Phalombe and Zomba with shelter construction materials and water and sanitation items to help them return to their homes as quickly as possible. From the outset, MRCS recognised that a key challenge to ensuring they reached the most vulnerable would be addressing people's fear of their community leaders, in particular that coming out in the open about corruption would lead to exclusion from future aid distributions and development opportunities.

To address this, MRCS implemented three simple measures;

1. All community volunteers were trained on community engagement and accountability approaches, including people's rights, what information to share with communities and how to collect and respond to feedback and complaints.
2. Awareness sessions were organised in all camps to explain the objectives of the response and who would be supported, the items being distributed and how people could confidentially share any complaints or concerns. This information was also shared tent to tent by the community volunteers.
3. Feedback and complaints systems were set up including suggestion boxes, an anonymous telephone line and face to face with the MRCS community development facilitators. Help desks were also established during all distributions so that any problems on the day could be captured and resolved quickly.

Results

By adopting a more systematic and deliberate approach to engaging communities, MRCS was able to prevent several cases of corruption or intimidation by community leaders and ensure the most vulnerable, such as female-headed households, were able to receive the support they needed. Below are three examples of the difference improved communication with communities and a well-functioning feedback and complaints system can make.



Agnes' story

Agnes Luka, a mother of two from Hetala Village in Lundu, lost her house during the March 2019 floods. Agnes sought shelter in an IDP camp, where she was registered and provided with a distribution card to receive shelter materials from MRCS.

Unfortunately, one of Agnes' children fell ill and was admitted to a local clinic. While Agnes was at the clinic, the village head and camp committee decided to take Agnes' distribution card and give it to another person who was not on distribution list. They informed Agnes she should not attend the MRCS distribution and should leave the camp on that day. However, Agnes was encouraged by her mother to come to the distribution and tell MRCS what had happened to her card. On the day, Agnes went straight to the help desk where she explained her story to the MRCS community feedback officer, who then discussed the issue with the operations team and took note of Agnes' name and card.

When Agnes name was called, the other lady whom the chief had given Agnes's card to, came forward to the verification desk. The MRCS team spotted the card and asked the lady some questions to verify is she was who she said she was and the answers she gave were contrary to the information they had on their records. Upon questioning, the lady confessed that she was not Agnes and that the card was given to her by the chief. MRCS returned the card to Agnes and she received her package.

Betty's story

When Betty Wilson's home was destroyed in the floods, she sought shelter in the Phalombi School Camp, home to 357 displaced families. Along with other vulnerable families, Betty was selected by MRCS to receive a transitional shelter. However, the Group Village Headman for the area in which the transitional shelters were being provided decided to take advantage of Betty and two other women's vulnerability and replace them on the programme with three of his relatives, who had not been affected by the floods.



However, Betty had been informed by MRCS about her rights and the options for providing feedback and complaints and decided to raise the issue face to face with MRCS' Community Development Facilitator, Chisomo Kapichi. The village civil protection committee chairman was also present and confirmed Betty's complaint was genuine and that this was a common practice of community leaders to replace genuine beneficiaries with their friends and relatives. The village civil protection chairman and MRCS held a meeting with the group village headman and explained their mandate to support the most vulnerable flood-affected families and that all families on the list would be checked and verified. The village headman did not proceed with his plans to replace the women and Betty and her two friends were among the twenty families who received a transitional shelter.



Mary's story – in her own words

"It was the 15th of May 2019 when I heard that the Red Cross people had come to our camp to address us. As usual I went to hear what it was about because it was the order of the day being called for different sessions by different organizations. This time around the Malawi Red Cross team came up with something different which changed my mindset. The purpose of the meeting was to sensitize us on the project duration, the materials to be distributed to the affected families, and the quantity.

In addition to the suggestion box that was made available to us to write our complaints during the distribution of relief items, a tip-off anonymous number of 847 was provided to us to enable us to send our complaints regarding the project and if our rights had been violated. I was very happy with the information

knowing that this was my help. On Tuesday 4th of June 2019, I called the number 847 after the village headman forcefully took part of the items which I received from Malawi Red Cross Society and I was unable to build my temporary shelter. The Red Cross team and the Government officials made a follow up and I was assisted accordingly.

The village headman admitted the allegations that she took some of my relief items because she was the one who assisted me during registration, since on the day of registering I was attending a funeral. The group village headman apologized and returned the shelter items to me. Thanks very much Malawi Red Cross Society team for the support you gave to me to get back my items and now I can build my temporary shelter. The telephone line 847 has rescued my property!"

Lessons learned

Positive

- Investing in training volunteers on community engagement approaches and response activities is critical to ensure they can confidently share this information with communities and answer any questions.
- Taking deliberate actions to ensure communities understand selection criteria, their rights and what they should receive can prevent corruption by ensuring people feel empowered to speak out when their rights are threatened by unscrupulous community leaders.
- It is important to have multiple channels for feedback and complaints as not everyone will feel comfortable using the same channel. Communities need to trust the feedback will be listened to, handled sensitively and acted upon before they will be willing to share it.
- MRCS also saw an overall increase in feedback from communities, including suggestions on what could be improved. Traditionally communities have been reluctant to share this kind of information with MRCS, but this kind of input is essential for improving programmes to better meet the needs of affected people.
- Involving government officials during the follow-up of complaints (when safe to do so) makes the process smoother and easier.



Areas for improvement

- It is critical to also sensitize local community leaders on selection criteria and processes, including the Red Cross mandate to help those most in humanitarian need and zero tolerance approach to corruption. Many community leaders thought that a person would automatically receive humanitarian aid if they were sleeping in a camp, even if their homes were not affected by the floods.
- Post-distribution monitoring showed while 69% of people in Phalombe district knew about the feedback and complaints systems, 31% did not.



Next steps and recommendations

Next steps

MRCS' experience highlights the importance of building trust with communities for preventing corruption and helping the National Society to meet its mandate to help the most vulnerable. Based on this experience MRCS will roll out community engagement training for volunteers and mainstream feedback and complaints systems into all programmes and operations. MRCS will also expand its community engagement activities to include briefings for community leaders, to ensure they understand MRCS' mandate and zero-tolerance approach to corruption.

Recommendations

This case study demonstrates the importance of community engagement approaches in emergency response operations. Specific recommendations for other National Societies and the IFRC include;

- Train community volunteers on community engagement approaches and ensure they are well informed about response activities, including the aid communities should receive.
- Make sure you allow time within your response to inform communities about selection criteria, what aid will be provided and how they can safely raise concerns. This could be the difference between meeting your mandate to reach the most vulnerable or reinforcing corruption and inequalities in communities.
- Communicating widely about selection criteria and aid items being provided can help prevent corruption and interference by community leaders as there won't be an 'information vacuum' they can exploit to share incorrect information with community members about their rights and entitlements.
- It is important to engage community leaders in discussions about the National Society's mandate and commitment to community engagement and accountability as this encourages them to work in the same way and can deter corrupt practices.
- Community engagement is particularly critical post-disaster when vulnerability is high and can expose people to a greater risk of abuse or corruption. The Movement has a responsibility to ensure our operations are delivered in a way that accounts for this increased vulnerability, for example by providing and widely advertising safe feedback and complaints mechanisms.
- When safe to do so, sharing success stories about how the feedback and complaints system has helped people can encourage others to come forward because they can see the system works and that corruption can be stopped.

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