

Grievance mechanisms for social protection programmes: stumbling blocks and best practice

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A Grievance Mechanism (GM) is a system that allows citizens to provide feedback to implementers of a given service and allows implementers to respond. There are several important benefits to setting up strong GMs for social protection programmes, such as: increasing overall programme accountability and citizens' trust and involvement; continuously solving operational issues (complementary to monitoring and evaluation) and reducing the cost of addressing them; holding implementing authorities accountable at all levels of implementation to curb corruption; and standardising programme implementation and performance.

Despite these benefits, a review of the relevant literature and primary research in Indonesia (Barca, Notosusanto and Emmett 2012) clearly highlighted that GMs within social protection programmes worldwide are often underused and/or underperforming. This is underpinned by both demand- and supply-side problems.

Demand-side problems, all of which are likely to have a greater impact on vulnerable and marginalised groups, include: lack of information about the programme and entitlements, including knowledge of how the GM works; not feeling entitled to redress for poor programme performance (feeling 'grateful' or 'embarrassed'); concerns about the repercussions of giving negative feedback; scepticism about the credibility of the GM and whether complaining changes outcomes; not being able to access existing GMs because of time and resources to make a complaint, illiteracy, stigma and/or lack of trust; and reluctance to challenge the authority of decision-makers (government staff and—where community targeting is used to determine eligibility—other community members) due to unequal power dynamics.

On the supply side, challenges include: lack of a standardised process to collect and respond to feedback; lack of communication between different levels of programme implementation; inadequate training on standard solutions to common grievances; an inadequate communication strategy to inform citizens of the GM functioning; existing processes to collect grievances that are not designed for the target population (e.g. complaint boxes for illiterate people etc.); no incentives to respond and act on grievances; and no system to monitor the collection and addressing of grievances.

Addressing the challenges, condensing international best practice:

International best practice discusses several solutions, while clarifying that GMs cannot compensate for poorly designed or implemented programmes (ibid.):

- It is more effective to resolve complaints at the point of service delivery, where information and transaction costs are lowest. This both reduces costs and improves accessibility to citizens.
- Setting up multiple channels for receiving complaints is the best way to ensure access, possibly building on existing systems.
- Access to independent channels for redress is important (e.g. links to ombudsmen, audit institutions, contracting out facilitation or collection of complaints to third parties).
- To perform effectively, GMs need dedicated staffing and standard operating procedures for different types of grievances. It is important to adequately train staff and set performance standards and targets to handle grievances in advance—most easily if GMs are incorporated directly into programme monitoring information systems.

- A widespread and continuous information campaign is crucial for stimulating demand by ensuring that the public understands programme objectives, selection criteria, how to register for the programme and who/how to access redress if there are problems (including special measures to reach the most vulnerable). Project authorities and staff need to convey and reinforce important messages over time: there is no financial charge for making a complaint; grievances are welcome because they help improve project policies, systems and service delivery; grievances will be treated confidentially; and complainants will not be punished for complaining.

Table 1 - Main types of programme grievance channels: pros and cons

Type of grievance channel	Pros	Cons
Social assistant/ social worker	- Strong understanding of social protection programmes - Very accessible locally - Regular contact with social protection programme management - Can be easily trained	- Potential conflict of interest (cannot complain to them about their conduct) - Not always capable of solutions (e.g. targeting) - Not anonymous or confidential - Could be biased against certain community members
Complaints box	- Easy to set up - Can be anonymous (if form clearly states that name and address are not needed)	- Not appropriate for those who are illiterate - Conviction on behalf of complainants that it would not be acted on
Call centre	- Direct - Simple - No problems linked to illiteracy - Theoretically can be anonymous/confidential - Useful in decentralised contexts	- Poor people are less likely to have access to a phone or to be willing to pay for the call - Less trust in revealing their identity and problems to someone they do not know - More difficult for the household to follow up on how the complaint is being managed - Needs to operate very well, or can backfire
Community grievance committees	- Members are from the community; widely known and trusted - Easy to access (direct and simple) - No problems linked to illiteracy	- Not anonymous or confidential - More costly to set up (identify actors) and train - Cannot make up for general programme weaknesses
Mobile unit	- Direct - Simple to access - No problems linked to illiteracy - Theoretically can be anonymous/confidential - Unbiased/external	- Reluctance to involve external actors (no trust in revealing their identity/problems to someone they do not know) - Not easily organised throughout the country - Costly to set up - People can only complain periodically

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on fieldwork in Indonesia and literature review, with some reference to Bassett and Blanco (2011).

References:

- Barca, V., S. Notosusanto, and B. Emmett. 2012. Review of, and Recommendations for, Grievance Mechanisms for Social Protection Programmes. Oxford: Oxford Policy Management. <<http://goo.gl/RkScUl>>. Accessed March 23, 2016.
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