COMMUNITY FEEDBACK IN FIJI

Good Practices in Community Engagement

This paper is a product of the Fiji Communication & Community Engagement Working Group

Responding to TC Keni in Kadavu, 2018 with Provincial Administrator Kadavu, UNICEF & RED R Australia Photo Credit: Rapuama Corerega

Fiji Meteorological Service

Habitat for Humanity

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Acknowledgement

Introduction

Making the collection and response to community feedback more systematic as part of Fiji's preparedness and emergency response work is still an emerging concept. The **2018 joint CDAC-GTS Fiji Scoping Study** on Communication and Community Engagement (CCE) found that there is substantial capacity and capability among humanitarian responders in various stages of the feedback cycle[1]. While stakeholders reported the capacity to collect feedback, the majority noted that they had found "conducting and operationalising coherent analysis, dialogue, and course correction measures" more challenging.

Importantly, organisations need to have a clear understanding of the difference between community feedback and needs, or damage assessments. Simply put, community feedback is any positive or negative feedback from those affected on humanitarian actors, the wider humanitarian system, or on the aid they have or have not received. On the other hand, needs assessments involve systematically gathering and analysing information relating to the needs, conditions, and capacities of people affected in order to determine gaps between the current situation and agreed standards.[2] Both have a role to play.

Currently both the NDMO and individual INGO/NGOs collect various community-level data. A recent set of interview[3], however, found that this data was not collected the same way, did not address the same set of issues, and were not systematically used for programme learning or adjustments. These findings confirm those from the CDAC-GTS scoping report. Despite the different and often ad hoc approaches to community feedback, there is growing consensus in Fiji that different actors should collaborate more and harmonise their collection processes. This work is currently being led by the CCE Working Group (CCE WG).

Establishing a collective feedback mechanism will support improved accountability, transparency, empowerment, and programme delivery, as well as support informed decision-making for emergency planning, response and recovery operations in Fiji[4]. Such a collective mechanism however will take time to embed and therefore, in the meantime, partners should seek to build on their own existing feedback practices. To that end, these case studies outline what different organizations are doing by way of feedback – it highlights some good practice and discusses familiar challenges. By sharing these examples, we hope other agencies will further reflect on their own approaches and draw on the experiences of others. Only when a critical mass of agencies contribute to the collective feedback mechanism will it be successful.

In designing the case studies, members of the CCEWG were involved in a series of interviews and surveys in August 2021, to determine how they are approaching community feedback using the following framing questions:
a) Why community feedback is important to the organisation
b) How the organisation collects feedback
c) Challenges in the process of collecting feedback
d) Using feedback to improve/support the community

The organisations whose feedback practices are portrayed in the ensuing pages include both government and Non-Governmental Organisations. These are:
a) Fiji Meteorological Services [FMS]
b) National Disaster Management Office [NDMO]
c) Fiji Council of Social Services [FCOSS]
d) Fiji Red Cross Society [FRCS]
e) Seismology Section of Mineral Resources Department [MRD]
f) Habitat for Humanity Fiji [HFHF].

It is important to note that the case studies were collected at a time when Fiji was reeling from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Face-to-face meetings and consultations were not possible, and the organisations were engaged through emails, telephone and remote research.

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1   The Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities Network (CDAC) Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) conducted a joint scoping trip to Fiji in 2018 to help support local actors to set-up a common Communications and Community Engagement plan and have been supporting ever since with funding from The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.
2   HUMANITARIAN FEEDBACK MECHANISMS - Research, evidence, and guidance Francesca Bonino with Isabella Jean and Paul Knox Clarke, ALNAPSTUDY
3   Status of Two-Way Communication in Fiji, A survey by Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities Network (CDAC) Ground Truth Solutions (GTS), September 2021
4   Concept Note: A Systematic Feedback Mechanism in Fiji, May 2020

National Disaster Management Office

Introduction

The National Disaster Management Office [NDMO] was established to be responsible for the day-to-day operations of disaster management. It operates under the Natural Disaster Management Act 1998 and the National Disaster Management Plan 1995. Activities of the NDMO are coordinated through the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management Organization Structures at the National, Divisional, District and community level. While opening the Fiji - Vanuatu Joint Learning Workshop on 5th March, 2020, the Director NDMO Vasiti Soko reiterated that "CCE advocates on the use of two-way communication channels so aid providers can listen to and act on people's needs, feedback and complaints, and receiving assistance."

Why Community Feedback is Important for NDMO

The Fiji National Humanitarian Policy highlights the need to gather feedback on community concerns and pro-actively engage community networks, private sector, and vulnerable people in information management and communication, particularly at the divisional and local level.

In its capacity as the coordinating mechanism for the government during natural disasters, the NDMO requires quality data to map out its strategies and plan its operations. Collecting a diverse range of data from various sources on communities about their capacities, vulnerabilities, the nature of hazards, and the extent of damage improves data quality. Further, the community's safety and security are prioritised during data collection.

Understanding the needs and experiences of different communities enables the NDMO to develop and strengthen disaster risk reduction and disaster management strategies, including mitigation, preparedness, response, relief and recovery systems. It integrates disaster risk reduction and disaster management into national sustainable development planning and decision-making processes at all levels (National, Divisional, Provincial, District and Community); and strengthens partnerships between all stakeholders in disaster risk reduction and disaster management.

How Feedback is Collected

The NDMO gathers feedback from communities through various channels. Firstly, it uses its coordinating structure through the Divisional Commissioners' Offices for community visits, face-to-face *talanoa* sessions and paper-based surveys. It also uses telephone and online tools like Kobo Toolbox and social media channels such as Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Twitter and YouTube to capture real-time information. Issues raised by communities are logged and referred to respective agencies for their intervention. For example, requests for food and Evacuation Centres are referred to the National Emergency Operation Centre (NEOC) at NDMO for assistance. Issues regarding power, water and roads were referred to Energy Fiji Limited (EFL), Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) and Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) for their assistance respectively.

During the height of TC Yasa which affected Fiji in mid-December 2020, the NDMO received real-time photos from affected communities in Bua, Macuata and Cakaudrove villages on the damage inflicted by the severe weather. Similarly, photos of relief work were shared by affected communities to the NDMO Facebook and Twitter accounts to update them on the progress of work and the experiences of first responders and communities on the ground.

Challenges in the Process

For NDMO, challenges in community feedback always exist. Accessibility is always an issue that needs to be addressed by a 'whole of government approach'. Reaching remote communities requires a lot of resources. Even if access to information is feasible in remote locations, the interpretation of the information for action is also a major challenge, as seen in the prevalence of misinformation and rumors during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Making sense of what the data is saying and how to respond to it has long been a challenge faced by the NDMO, who sit across many data sources.

While technological advances have aided the collection of data, it has also brought its own challenges – those using information management technologies (such as Kobo) require regular capacity support otherwise information cannot flow, nor be used for improved understanding and service delivery.

Using Feedback to Support

The use of social media platforms like Facebook during disasters can support NDMO's disaster response operations. During TC Yasa, information from the _NDMO Facebook platform_ informed and assisted sectors like Agriculture, Health, Education, Forestry, Fisheries, NGOs, Energy Fiji Limited, Tourism, Transport, and the Media to use a targeted approach in assessing damage and map out strategies to rehabilitate affected communities. For example, engineers from the Ministry of Education's Assets Monitoring Unit relied on pictures and information of damaged schools from the NDMO Facebook page to assist them in their Initial Damage Assessment [IDA]. Partners also used the NDMO Facebook page to verify relief distribution conducted by their staff on the ground.

Mark Zuckerberg, CEO & Founder of Facebook beautifully sums up the significance of Facebook to community engagement when he said, _"When you give everyone a voice and give people power, the system usually ends up in a really good place."_

Fiji Council of Social Services

Introduction

The Fiji Council of Social Services [FCOSS] was established as a network of non-profit organisations in 1957, and now has over 300 members and 200 associated memberships. FCOSS aims to advance social justice and economic development, fostering a strong community welfare sector and capacity building for its member CSOs. It is a member of the National Disaster Council, and works to leverage the voice of CSOs and communities in national, regional and international policy spaces.

Why Community Feedback is Important for FCOSS

FCOSS collects feedback from both NGO members and at the community level, and embraces the opportunity to reflect on its work. Feedback is important to FCOSS, as it allows members space to provide feedback on how programmes and activities have impacted their organizations and by extension, the lives of the communities they work in. Furthermore, it also enables FCOSS to improve its future interventions and strategies by listening to communities and using their experiences to shape its emergency response work, including monitoring and evaluating the work of member NGOs.

How Feedback is Collected

FCOSS gathers feedback from its members through Focus Group Discussions and Daily Observation Reports. It collects community feedback through its annual Livelihood Impact Surveys using Kobo toolbox. It also engages its members in Facebook chats and group pages.

The Livelihood Survey that was conducted in 2020 gauged how public financial management systems were supporting livelihoods, resilience, and the wellbeing of communities. In 2021, its survey focused on how Covid 19 impacted household wellbeing. The Daily Observation Reports are compiled across FCOSS members and illustrate the state and impact of humanitarian operations in member-supported communities. Data is then analysed during an Annual Reflection; an activity conducted by FCOSS where these different data sources are brought together to prompt reflection on activities and to strengthen FCOSS' operations.

Challenges in the Process

Conducting surveys in communities pose a number of challenges. For FCOSS, funding is always the major issue when accessing communities. This is why surveys are done annually, and not more frequently. The remoteness and inaccessibility of some Fijian communities adds to this problem.

"There is no way of knowing whether our humanitarian interventions are actually helping people until we build systems of community feedback and prepare ourselves as humanitarian response organisations to learn from these feedback and improve our approaches."

Vani Catanasiga [CEO, FCOSS]

Using Feedback to Improve

FCOSS is able to use the data to advocate to government and other stakeholders, ensuring the participation of members and communities in decision-making. These decisions include development planning, implementation, and financing. FCOSS members and their communities also benefit through improved interventions across both the development and humanitarian sectors. Finally, members are empowered to design and implement their own surveys which strengthens their knowledge of communities and allows them to negotiate on behalf of their communities. FCOSS emphasizes the importance of responding to the communities that participate in the surveys, so they know how their voices are shaping the decisions that affect their lives. This is commonly referred to as 'closing the feedback loop.'
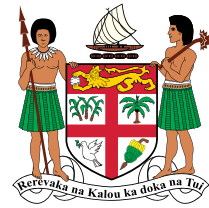
Fiji Meteorological Service

Introduction

The Fiji Meteorological Services [FMS] was established in Laucala Bay, Suva before World War two to monitor the weather around Fiji. During the war, it supported allied forces and now, based in Nadi, continues to monitor weather patterns, providing forecasts and warnings for extreme weather events such as cyclones, flooding and drought. FMS is therefore a critical partner in protecting the safety and wellbeing of communities in Fiji.

Fiji Meteorological Service

Why Community Feedback is Important for FMS?

Feedback is central to the functions of FMS. It enables FMS to tailor its products to the needs of its end users; communities vulnerable from unpredictable and potentially dangerous weather events. By providing relevant and timely information, based on community feedback, FMS supports communities in planning their activities and making decisions that saves lives at critical times.

How Feedback is Collected?

Feedback from communities is collected by FMS in a number of ways. These include a feedback portal – (located on its webpage, see the example available [here](#)), regular surveys using online data/feedback collection tools (such as Survey Monkey, Kobo Toolbox), hosting National forums such as the Climate Outlook Forum [NCOF] and community awareness visits. These feedback channels also incorporate information from other agencies, such as the National Disaster Management Office, the Ministries of Agriculture, Health, Forests, Fisheries, Tourism, Transport, Energy Fiji, Non-governmental Organizations and the Media. FMS stakeholders can systematically help strengthen and improve FMS' various products by providing feedback through these various channels.

Fig.1 The Early Rainfall Watch Bulletin Source: Fiji Meteorological Services

FMS recently used Survey Monkey to gather feedback on one of its specific products called the Early Action Rainfall (EAR) Watch Bulletin. It posed three questions which prompted users to share their thoughts on the quality and relevance of the EAR as well as giving users an opportunity to provide any other suggestions or comments which might assist FMS improve the product. Similarly, the 2020 NCOF served as a platform for communication and engagement with end users; it sought to obtain their feedback on the usefulness of products and possible areas for improvement – for example the way information is presented and communicated (including formats, standards, visual interpretation, etc.).

In April 2021, a case study on the sugar industry in Fiji was also carried out by FMS. The Kobo toolbox data collection tool was used to gather feedback. Farmers and sugarcane industry employees were interviewed to develop a greater understanding of the industry and farmers' needs.
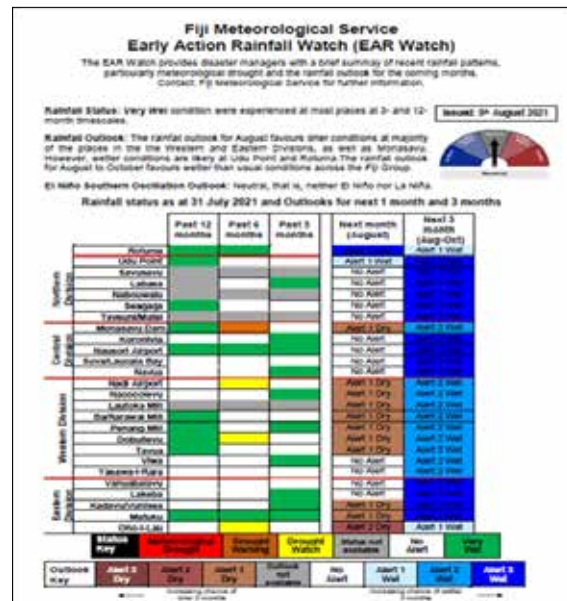

Fig.2 Survey Questionnaire for Early Rainfall Watch Bulletin Source: Fiji Meteorological Services

Challenges in the Process

Implementing a feedback mechanism has its own set of challenges. These include collecting data on a timely basis – which is important if FMS is going to adapt its products accordingly. It is also important to ask the right questions, so communities and other users are able to accurately respond, and so that the resulting data is beneficial for FMS. Previous surveys, for example, have generated data that is not particularly useful to FMS. Another challenge is that FMS outputs are often technical, and not all users are technically orientated. Soliciting feedback on such products can be difficult.

Using Feedback to Improve

There are clear examples that show how feedback is improving service delivery and products. For example, the Water Authority of Fiji [WAF] indicated the type of climate information they need and their preferred method of communication. In response, FMS ensured that WAF received their Fiji Climate Outlook through email on a monthly basis and Weather Bulletin through email on a daily basis. This allows WAF to plan and maintain the water service network.

Similarly, the Ministry of Health & Medical Services [MH&MS] provided feedback which improved the FMS webpage and made data more readily accessible. This in turn enabled them to use the weather and climate data to drive their dengue early warning system and to develop an early warning system model for diarrhea.

In opening the NCOF in 2019, the FMS Director reiterated the value of ongoing feedback and stated, *one of our main outcomes is to provide a regular platform for communication with users and obtain their feedback on the usefulness of products and their level of understanding.*

Fiji Red Cross Society

Introduction

The Fiji Red Cross Society (FRCS) was established to provide humanitarian assistance to affected communities in Fiji. With over 50 years of experience, the FRCS is a community focused organization, which aims to empower the communities it serves, through the work of trained community-based volunteers across the country. It also supports the Government of Fiji to assist the vulnerable through delivering emergency assistance and other humanitarian services to affected communities. FRCS has 16 Branches and 3 Divisional Red Cross Offices across the country to administer and manage their programs. They are committed to building a safe, healthy and resilient Fiji, in partnership with local communities and stakeholders.

Why Community Feedback is Important for FRCS

FRCS collects data as part of its regular operations. In part, this to help the Fiji Red Cross acquire feedback on the services or assistance it provides. It also analyses communities' and customers' experiences with Red Cross services and assistance before and after a disaster. Importantly, it enables FRCS to know what resources are available and what vulnerable people need the most in terms of building the resilience of their communities.

How Feedback is Collected

FRCS collect data from a wide range of sources for a range of purposes, including from intended beneficiaries, Volunteers and staff of Red Cross, Fiji Red Cross partners and the communities that are affected by disasters. Methods of data collection include online surveys (utilizing either KOBO or Survey Monkey), Key Informant interviews, and Focus Group Discussions. Data collation take place at the beginning, during and end of a project, post disaster, and pre-disaster, and sometimes randomly (as the need arises on research with FRCS partners).

The content of surveys includes demographic questions about the individual, as well as clarifying their understanding of certain concepts, their assumptions and rationale for behaviors, as well as their perspective on what was done well, what was not done well, and what can be done if given other opportunities.

Challenges in the Process

At the FRCS, feedback challenges include access – with people often unavailable to participate in surveys or Focus Group Discussions. Relatedly, in rural and remote areas, the internet connection is either slow or non-existent, again limiting access to surveys. Occasionally respondents may not able to provide accurate and honest answers. This is a common challenge with all feedback, and one that needs careful attention. Similarly, respondents may not feel comfortable providing answers that present themselves in an unfavorable light. It is often helpful to explain the purpose of the survey and make people understand their honest responses will be treated confidentially and help to improve service delivery.

Using Feedback to Improve

The community benefits by having a simple and easy way of communicating feedback to the FRCS. Moreover, a systematic feedback system helps in strengthening communities' relationship with the Fiji Red Cross, paving the way for deeper and more meaningful collaboration. It also enables the FRCS to receive first-hand information from its intended beneficiaries faster. As much of this data is captured online, it aids analysis and helps the FRCS improve its services and support.

Seismology Section of the Mineral Resources Department

Introduction

The Mineral Resources Department's [MRD] Seismology Section [SS] is responsible for a number of activities, including the monitoring of seismic and tsunami events, timely dissemination of Earthquake and Tsunami information to the media and other agencies for public protection purposes. Furthermore, SS is also responsible for Earthquake and Tsunami Outreach to the public, with a special focus on coastal communities.

Why Community Feedback is Important for SS

An effective feedback system helps the SS understand how they could improve their monitoring systems and communications to better ensure the safety of the public including vulnerable groups such as coastal communities, before, during or after a disaster. Figure 3 from the SS FB page shows the type of feedback collected from the communities. Furthermore, it allows the SS to demonstrate the impact of its work to others, including key stakeholders and development partners/donor agencies.

How Feedback is Collected SS uses different channels to gather feedback from its communities. This includes a combination of both paper and digital platforms. Paper based feedback is mainly used during community visits, consultations with community leaders and office visits by community representatives. SS uses digital platforms to collect feedback including by email, Facebook, SMS text messages and Viber/ Messenger. SS also uses phone calls, radio talkback shows and a Suggestion or Complaints Box in their office to gather feedback from customers about their services.

SS uses these tools to collect information about community preparedness for disasters, how a community has been affected by disasters, and the needs of vulnerable groups. Moreover, it also uses these platforms to improve the quality and relevance of its support programs and information dissemination.

Challenges in the Process

There are two main issues when ensuring the effectiveness of the SS feedback systems. Firstly, there is no unified feedback system in-place and different agencies have their own approaches which makes aggregating, analysing and responding to data harder. Secondly, accessing remote communities, especially during or immediately after a disaster is very costly.

Using Feedback to Improve

SS is using the information it collects from communities to improve a whole range of its processes and services. For example, ensuring that tsunami warnings and cancellations are disseminated through all communication channels as quickly as possible. The feedback firstly informs the SS's approach to disaster preparedness, ensuring standard operating procedures are clearly communicated in advance of any disaster. For example, affected communities raise their complaints through SS FB page if they don't hear the siren during a tsunami siren test. This allows SS to improve their systems before the next test. The data has also been used by SS to better target its services where it is needed most and adjust the different support services available.

Fig 3. Sample community feedback on the tsunami generated by the Tonga volcano
Source: Fiji Seismology FB Page

Habitat for Humanity Fiji

Introduction

Habitat for Humanity Fiji [HFHF], is a nonprofit housing organization which was established in Fiji in 1991. Habitat Fiji's vision is of a Fiji where everyone has a decent place to live. Habitat Fiji works toward this vision by building and improving homes in partnership with individuals and families in need of a decent and affordable place to live.

Since its inception, about 70,000 people have benefited through its housing projects delivered in partnership with government, non-profit organizations, and international volunteers. HFHF works on a range of projects throughout the country including disaster response and recovery through repairs and temporary housing. It also constructs and improves water, sanitation and hygiene [WASH] systems in rural and remote areas and helps make housing projects accessible to people with disabilities.

Why Community Feedback is Important for HFHF

HFHF collects feedback from its communities to plan its operations in Fiji. This is achieved in two ways: firstly, it improves HFHF's services by systematically and proactively engaging with communities on their preferences and needs. Secondly, it shares community feedback with key stakeholders such as donors, partners, clusters, and the NDMO, thus improving coordinated decision-making. For example, the recommendations from the survey which HFHF carried out in 2019 was shared with key stakeholders and the communities themselves. Implementation of agreed 'corrective actions' in response to community feedback, however, were hindered due to natural disasters and Covid-19 in 2020.

How Feedback is Collected

HFHF gathers feedback from affected communities through community surveys using paper-based approaches, community discussions, as well as remote data collection methods such as Kobo Toolbox, Rapid Pro, and Facebook. HFHF designed a 5-step process to collecting and responding to community feedback. This involves: 1) designing community engagement tools, 2) data collection, 3) data analysis, 4) community dialogue, and most importantly, 5) using the data to improve the intervention or service delivery.

> *"Community feedback is important as it reduces confusion, tensions and conflict with and between communities"*
>
> Masi Latianara [HFHF] 15 February, 2019 'Systematic Engagement in Fiji' workshop

In 2019, HFHF, with GTS support, conducted a community feedback survey in 3 communities of Bilalevu, Veivatuloa and Nabukavesi. They surveyed more than 200 people using Kobo Toolbox in 4 days. Some of the questions they asked related t: the extent to which HFHF services are meeting communities' most important needs, which important needs are not being met, security in their place of residence, and community understanding of the process of lodging complaints and suggestions.

Challenges in the Process

HFHF's determination to focus on community engagement in 2020 was challenged by TC Harold and COVID-19 in March. This was compounded by TC Yasa in December of the same year and then TC Ana the following month. Accessing communities was not possible for the whole year due to the national lockdown, thus, all field activities were delayed and HFHF's plans for community engagement were indefinitely postponed. HFHF did however respond to humanitarian needs and conducted damage assessments, distributed emergency shelter kits and delivered Build Back Safer (BBS) and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Awareness trainings in affected communities. BBS is a program run by HFHF to build safer houses after a disaster. It is derived from Priority 4 of the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction which focuses on enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to 'Build Back Better' in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction. The urgent need for surge response, coupled with the ongoing Covid-19 situation delayed plans for capturing and responding to community feedback.
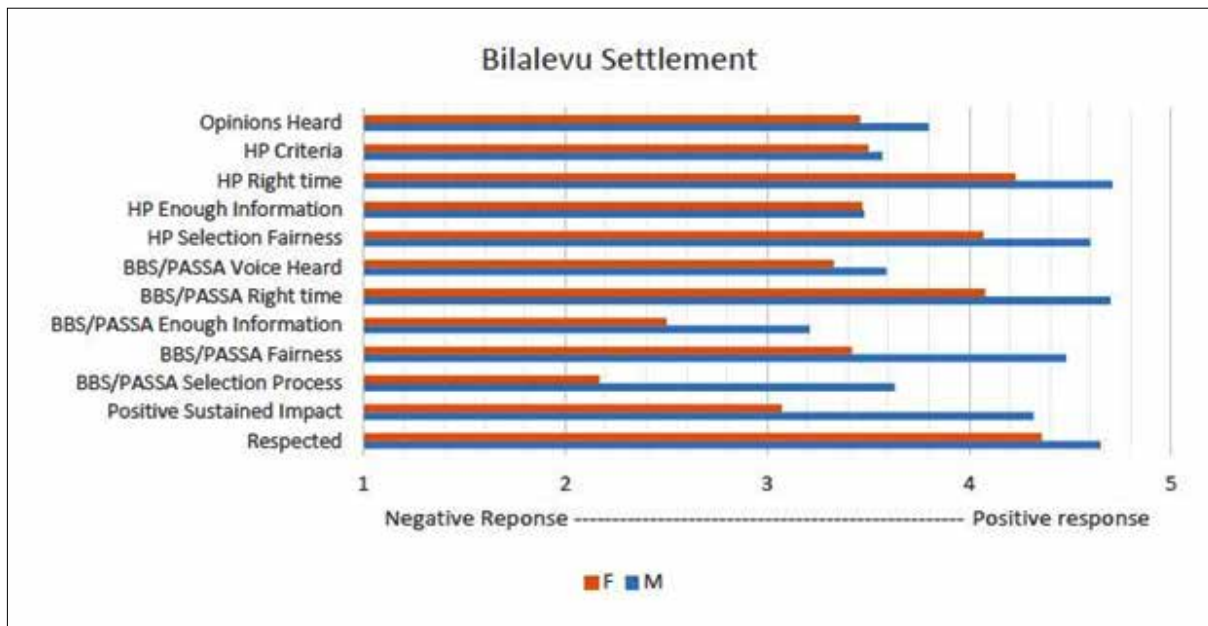
Fig. 4: The graph shows the perceptions of those in Bilalevu on whether they were satisfied with the PASSA and BBS training.
Source: Habitat for Humanity Fiji Community Development: "Closing the loop"

Using Feedback to Improve

Effective communication to and from communities helped ensure that HFHF 'close the loop' to create a win-win scenario – they improved relationships with communities by showing them how they were using their feedback, as well as acting on the findings of the survey to improve services themselves. HFHF used feedback to improve their programmes such as the Build Back Safer program, Participatory Approaches to Safe Shelter Awareness Training (PASSA), Communities for Communities, Women for Water and WASH related initiatives.

Conclusion

While each of the six organisations referenced in these case studies used different methods to collect their feedback, all of them recognised the concept that systematic community feedback is critical to delivering the best possible services. All of them have found it has improved the way they work and the outcomes they can achieve. Moreover, they show that this concept is gaining traction in Fiji, and while there is more to done across the whole sector, there are plenty of examples of good feedback practice to learn from.

The shift in Fiji is reflective of a larger trend across the global humanitarian sector. To keep abreast of this global advance towards ensuring the voices of communities are reflected in the decision-making and actions of humanitarian responders, there is a need to embed the actions of individual agencies into a collective and coordinated mechanism. This plays into the plans and desires of the NDMO, and reinforces their existing path.

These examples are only several from a larger pool of agencies, and demonstrate the exciting direction the Fiji sector is heading in. The more actors can share - both their successes but also their failures - the quicker the whole of Fiji can really embrace good feedback practice at scale.