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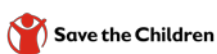
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# JOFA Project Thematic Review: Child friendly feedback and complaints mechanisms

Joining Forces for Africa (JOFA)



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## BACKGROUND

**The establishment of effective feedback and complaints mechanisms is central to building and improving the accountability of development and humanitarian actors and interventions to their intended beneficiaries and stakeholders. When children are one of the targeted beneficiary groups, these mechanisms must be child friendly, inclusive and responsive in order to ensure their effectiveness and relevance.**



The inclusion of child friendly feedback and complaints mechanisms was built into the design of the JOFA project across all five countries, to “ensure that project activities are accountable to the needs and rights of children, and that children’s voices are included in the review of activity implementation effectiveness.” From the beginning, the project recognized that some of the child protection issues it sought to address were normalized and accepted among the families, communities and children themselves, and that children (particularly girls) could be at increased risk of harm as a result of their association with the project’s proposed actions, for example, if parents or caregivers who were perpetrators of violence against children were angered at their participation. This was particularly so in the context of the expected rise in violence against children associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community and children’s access to safe and confidential complaints and feedback

mechanisms was one of the tools that the JOFA project included in its design to mitigate project risks. One of the 4 specific objectives was to foster “increased learning and sharing of knowledge and best practice related to child protection approaches.” At the design stage, the project included a specific activity under this result area, calling for the establishment of community-based complaints and feedback mechanisms (including suggestion boxes).

The consortium approach meant that partners in the five JOFA countries and settings had different starting points and approaches in terms of the establishment, facilitation and strengthening of these mechanisms. Many JOFA partners had existing and well-established child friendly community-based complaints and feedback mechanisms. In general, the feedback and complaint mechanisms were often better established in the project’s humanitarian contexts (e.g., in the refugee camp settings) than in development contexts.

# CHILD FRIENDLY FEEDBACK AND COMPLAINTS MECHANISMS: A CROSS-COUNTRY SNAPSHOT



## ETHIOPIA

In Ethiopia, prior to JOFA, there were mechanisms and established structures in place (e.g., suggestion boxes) to receive and respond to complaints, with staff responsible for the monitoring and follow-up. One of the key differences between the previous approach and the approach developed under JOFA, however, was the concerted effort to adapt these mechanisms to ensure that they were child friendly. One JOFA partner staff member shared, for example, that some children cannot read or write to the level required to write out a complaint for a suggestion box, and further, they might not have the knowledge, or the comfort level, required to do so. To help address this, one innovation by child protection officers was the preparation of a template for children to help guide any written feedback that children might want to provide.

The JOFA team also discussed potential approaches to the development of more child friendly feedback and complaints mechanisms with child protection staff and came up with a series of new ideas. For example, the team decided to hold regular Child Forums to receive feedback and complaints directly from children. The team also used child protection staff and volunteers, alongside para-social workers, to receive feedback from children at the ground level. Through these forums, children were engaged and supported to formulate and share their own feedback and complaints, and also to raise any child protection concerns that impacted them. Engaging the children and providing intentional opportunities for them to provide direct feedback about how to improve the project also enhanced children's motivation to

participate in the project. In the refugee camp settings in project sites in Assosa, the high numbers of unaccompanied and separated children with heightened vulnerabilities prompted the JOFA project team to hold regular, separate meetings with these children to ensure that their input was heard, and their needs met as best as possible.

A pivotal component of these feedback mechanisms was the development of clear response and follow-up processes. Staff shared that complaints might be directed to JOFA, but at times, they were directed to another institution or government department: "We had to develop mechanisms to refer the complaints or feedback to the right place."

The team also needed to ensure that any complaints or feedback received through these mechanisms directly related to child protection, such as physical or sexual abuse, were quickly and appropriately addressed. For example, suggestion boxes were opened every day to ensure that any complaints related to child protection or prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) were referred quickly and to the appropriate point of contact.

The team also trained volunteers at established Child Protection help desks in the camps to receive children's feedback and complaints, which helped the project receive further input from children. Schools were another mechanism through which feedback from children was collected, although many children were unable to access education for many months, particularly during times of camp conflict and displacement.



## KENYA

In Kenya, all JOFA partner agencies already had feedback mechanisms as part of their standard practice. As with Ethiopia, the unique or innovative feature of this work under JOFA was the deliberate focus on how to collect and analyse data from children.

Dedicated feedback sessions were held with JOFA project beneficiaries at the end of each project quarter, including one dedicated session with children exploring what had gone well with the project so far, and what could be improved. There were also “drop boxes” and a toll-free number for parents, caregivers and children.

At face-to-face feedback sessions, JOFA team members also asked if there was anyone who had raised an issue that had not been addressed.

A Terres des Hommes staff member shared that Child Friendly Accountability (CFA) approaches had also been a pivotal part of their engagement and support of children to raise their own complaints and issues, not just with the JOFA project, but also directly with duty bearers.

The team worked to prepare children ahead of time to help them understand who the relevant duty bearers were, and what roles they held, as well as how to help children identify the issues they would like to raise. In one example, the JOFA team first approached security sector stakeholders, including the police and area chief and invited them to meet with the children. A staff member shared that in Kenya, such accountability and feedback sessions with duty bearers were still quite rare: “Duty bearers don’t like to be held to account, let alone by children.” These duty bearers wanted to know ahead of the meeting what questions the children would ask them, but the JOFA team explained that they did not know as the issues or questions raised would come from the children themselves. The team reassured the duty bearers that the children “are friendly and don’t mean any harm.”

At this meeting, children raised their concerns, such as people selling drugs to children in their communities, access to water, and non-functional streetlights in their settlements (which had been disconnected by the government in that specific “illegal” settlement).



**KENYA**

A staff member shared, “So, children said, our parents can’t pay for this, but as the government, perhaps you need to fix the street lighting – and a week or two after, the streetlights were up.” The police officer present at the meeting, who had been difficult to engage initially, stayed beyond the end of the meeting to keep engaging with the children.

Staff reported that the area chief still comments on the meeting and that children are no longer viewing these duty bearers as unapproachable. The area chief has noted that now, some children will approach him to greet him when they see him. The team also hosted similar feedback meetings between children and officials in the healthcare sector.

To encourage the availability of feedback and complaints mechanisms suitable for children with disabilities, the project worked with a community-based organisation (CBO) focusing on disability at one site to ensure that a drop box or suggestion box was available at that CBO. While this did not solve all the inclusion-related challenges involved in accessing suitable mechanisms for children with disabilities (discussed further below), the project team knew that any of the specific issues raised by children coming from that drop box were issues raised by children with disabilities.

**FEEDBACK IN ACTION**

In one project site in Kenya, children used feedback mechanisms to let project staff know that the project activities and sessions were sometimes taking up too much of their time. While they wanted to participate, they also had other obligations they needed to meet, and they asked the team to better accommodate their schedules and needs.

Children also shared that when they had sessions at a certain time of day, their parents assumed that they would eat a meal with the project, and therefore did not leave food for them at home. The children would then miss a meal. Knowing this, the project responded to ensure this did not happen. One JOFA partner staff member shared, “Without that feedback, we wouldn’t have known.”





## MALI



In Mali, suggestion boxes were placed in each community, where adult community members and children could put their suggestions or input in their local languages. Feedback mechanisms were used both for reporting child protection concerns (e.g., cases of violence or negligence) but also for feedback specific to the JOFA programme. Protection concerns were separated and referred.

A committee was established to review the comments, suggestions or reports, including, for example, the JOFA facilitator for the village, the village chief, and a child representative (for questions that were appropriate for children). Mobile phones were also provided to one point person in the community, set up so that a caller simply had to call and hang up for a return call, or send an SMS to contact the project focal point.

Initial focus groups were held with children who were Children's Club participants in each village to discuss and explain the purpose of child friendly feedback and complaints mechanisms, and to gather children's input and opinions regarding what these mechanisms should look like. This included

input regarding who the children felt should be assigned to manage the mobile phone for telephone reports, and where the suggestion box should be positioned in the community in order for it to be accessible and confidential.

Throughout project activities, community point persons and leaders also held face-to-face meetings and project reviews to gather feedback on project activities, including from children.

The use of CFA approaches was also highlighted in Mali as a means through which children became more active in JOFA programming, as advocates and agents of change regarding issues that affect them, as well as contributors to improving JOFA programming.

The project team also worked with existing community mechanisms or leaders, some of whom were already active before the JOFA project while others were put in place at the suggestion of the community to encourage children's participation and feedback. These individuals were required to be people trusted by children.



## MALI

For those children who could not read or write, use suggestion boxes, or access or use the telephone, these individuals provided another point of contact for children's feedback and reports of protection issues.

Children also formed close relationships with facilitators at Children's Clubs and Listening Centres in villages and communities hosting displaced persons. At times, children spoke to these facilitators about the programme or their own psychosocial issues. Facilitators were then able to refer them to additional services as needed.

A JOFA partner staff member shared that while there was low use of feedback mechanisms such as suggestion boxes and telephone communication early in the project, following sensitisation sessions with communities, including children, the use of these mechanisms increased, and the team was able to receive and respond to feedback.

Subsequent focus groups with children participating in Children's Clubs were also held during Quarterly Reviews to regularly obtain children's perspectives on project activities. The JOFA team in Mali paid close attention to ensure that both in-school and out-of-school children were included, and that there was equal representation of boys and girls in these groups. These sessions were viewed as particularly helpful in gaining children's perspectives.

## FEEDBACK IN ACTION



In Mali during a quarterly focus group with children, young boys complained that JOFA activities were more focused on girls than boys. Project staff responded by holding discussion sessions with girls and boys, during which they facilitated activities to discuss the different lives (e.g., gender roles) of girls and boys in the community. These discussions generated a common understanding that most girls wake up early with a heavy burden of household chores to undertake, and are occupied almost all day, whereas many boys had little to do during the day. These discussions also explored the different vulnerabilities of girls and boys, which resulted in the boys having a better understanding of the focus of JOFA activities.





## SENEGAL



In Senegal, one of the first JOFA project activities was to hold information sessions with community members, including adults and children, to explain the importance of community feedback on project activities, and introduce the various feedback mechanisms that were available for the community.

Focus group discussions were held with adults and children separately to discuss the different feedback mechanisms, and how these could most effectively be adapted to ensure they were child friendly.

Training sessions were also held with key stakeholders to explain the function of these feedback mechanisms as well as processes for responding to the feedback, suggestions, or reports received.

The main feedback mechanisms were suggestion boxes, from which comments were collected and responded to each month, a telephone number, and quarterly community meetings that coincided with the JOFA project's reporting cycle.

Some of the challenges associated with the suggestion boxes are discussed below under Challenges and Barriers.

JOFA partner staff in Senegal reported that these quarterly community meetings and focus groups generated substantial feedback from adults and children.

The children's groups included girls and boys aged 10-18 years, who were part of Youth Clubs in the community.

These quarterly meetings and focus groups also provided the JOFA teams with the opportunity to highlight how the team responded to the previous complaints, feedback, and questions that they received.

One JOFA project staff member shared that during the quarterly focus group discussions, they could directly respond to children's requests or negotiate other solutions, if the suggestions from children were not feasible from a budgetary perspective or otherwise. For example, in one focus group, children suggested a toll-free number would be useful but there was no budget available for this in the programme.

As an alternative, the team and the children negotiated that the children would be provided with the telephone number for the M&E point person, whom they could call directly at any time with complaints or comments. This kind of "negotiation" was noted to have been useful on multiple occasions. In Senegal, the team also learned a lot from what was referred to by one team member as "mouth-to-ear" feedback – that is, informal discussions with community members and project beneficiaries, including children, outside of official collection methods.







## UGANDA



In Uganda, training of JOFA partners on child friendly feedback and complaints mechanisms was undertaken early in the project by the MEAL team, ensuring that all personnel had access to the various tools developed by JOFA to support this engagement.

The team also worked to ensure that the feedback and response mechanisms were known and understood in communities, for example, through sharing information through community radios at child friendly spaces (e.g., schools). One JOFA partner staff member shared, "JOFA ensures that children have a voice, and we have the tools that allow them to engage." As with the other JOFA countries, there were synergies between the project's approach to supporting child friendly feedback and complaints mechanisms, and its use of CFA technical approaches.

JOFA project teams specifically sought children's feedback on project activities, including children's experiences of the project and how it could be strengthened or improved, through bi-annual, gender-segregated and mixed feedback sessions

with children, or surveys are done following the implementation of activities such as the Parenting without Violence learning sessions. The project also sought to provide platforms for children to represent themselves and their issues with duty bearers. These approaches contributed to the building of children's skills and confidence and enabled them to identify and articulate their concerns both about the project and the various child protection issues it sought to address.

According to staff, the feedback mechanisms were useful to help them identify where beneficiaries, including children, were unsatisfied or felt there could be improvements in the project, and to enable JOFA partners to respond in a timely manner. One example of feedback they received from beneficiaries related to the team's occasional lateness at meetings due to traffic. As a result, the team endeavoured to adjust their logistics accordingly to ensure on time arrival to meetings. A JOFA team member reflected that the feedback mechanisms also helped their project team to manage beneficiary expectations by clarifying with children and community members what, specifically, the JOFA project could offer.

# DRIVERS OF EFFECTIVE CHILD FRIENDLY FEEDBACK AND COMPLAINTS MECHANISMS

Some of the key drivers of effective approaches to child friendly feedback and complaints mechanisms in the JOFA project include (1) structured learning opportunities within the project, (2) capacity building and knowledge sharing, (3) the synergies between these feedback and complaints mechanisms and the CFA approaches used in JOFA, (4) engaging children early in the project, and (5) providing multiple, accessible options for the collection of feedback from children.

## Structured learning opportunities within the project

In April and May 2022, the JOFA team undertook a project-wide review across all five countries of the child friendly feedback mechanisms in place. The review was undertaken to monitor progress to date, identify challenges, and provide an evidence base to support the improvement of these mechanisms. To do this, the project developed a “Scorecard” that reflected the following five aspects of a child friendly feedback mechanism: (1) information provision; (2) child friendly feedback channels; (3) the feedback loop; (4) staff capacity; and (5) learning from feedback. A series of questions was developed under each of these five aspects.

The tool was designed to be administered in each of the supervision areas of each country, following which, the data would be compiled to yield a clear picture of country-level progress. Importantly, the tool was also designed to be completed through a focus group discussion not just with relevant project staff, but also with community representatives, including children. The process also required a discussion to identify shortcomings and subsequent actions for improvements.

## Capacity building and knowledge sharing

To help build capacity and share knowledge between staff from across the five JOFA countries, an online technical sharing workshop was held in Year One of the project. In the workshop, staff shared knowledge on best practices, challenges and solutions to providing effective child friendly feedback and complaints mechanisms, including global guidance from across different development and humanitarian agencies.





### **Synergies between these feedback and complaints mechanisms and the Child Friendly Accountability approaches used in JOFA**

As the examples from across the JOFA countries highlighted, the synergies between

the child friendly feedback and complaints mechanisms and the CFA approaches utilised in the project were notable. Building children's confidence and capacity to speak on their own behalf about the issues that concern them was key in the CFA activities, as well as in the more project-specific feedback sessions and focus groups held with children.

***“Children are now more ready and willing to give feedback to stakeholders beyond the JOFA project – to other child protection actors, to police and others. The feedback is not just to the project team, but to others. We see them giving feedback to different partners, and we see the partners taking their views more seriously. And children are giving feedback to their parents. Before the project, this was not a clear thing. Parents now say that their children give them feedback, and teachers too. And children are giving feedback to each other, even younger to older children, in their engagement amongst each other.”***

JOFA project staff member, Kenya

### **Engaging children early in the project**

Another effective approach from different JOFA countries is the engagement of children and other community members early in the project to explain the fundamental objectives of feedback mechanisms and offer children opportunities to share their perspectives, ideas and suggested approaches to feedback mechanisms in their specific communities or contexts.

### **Providing multiple, diverse options for the collection of feedback from children**

Finally, having multiple avenues available simultaneously for children to provide feedback and complaints ensures that children of varying ages, abilities, levels of confidence

and literacy levels can engage with ongoing project improvement. JOFA project countries implemented diverse mechanisms for feedback such as focus groups and activity reviews, phone lines, suggestion boxes in well-positioned places, schools, and relevant CBOs, as well as having other community members or point people trained to receive and respond effectively to feedback or complaints from children. Consistent discussions with children to understand how different mechanisms could be better adapted yielded helpful feedback across countries. Having separate, targeted approaches for obtaining feedback from sub-groups of children with specific needs (e.g., children who were not in school and/or could not read or write, children with disabilities, or unaccompanied and separated minors) was also beneficial.

## CHALLENGES OR BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE CHILD FRIENDLY FEEDBACK AND COMPLAINTS MECHANISMS

Various challenges or barriers to the provision and management of effective child friendly feedback and complaints mechanisms were highlighted through discussions with JOFA partner staff and the document review. These include (1) managing the expectations of children providing feedback, (2) managing a wide range of mixed feedback from children and others, (3) lack of cultural precedence, (4) language challenges (especially in refugee camp settings), and (5) disability inclusion.

### Managing the expectations of children providing feedback

Managing children's expectations was a challenge for some of the JOFA project partners. Given the different contexts of this work, in which issues of poverty, conflict and displacement are prevalent, it was a challenge for partners to respond to children's inevitable requests for material support or assistance, which was beyond the project's scope or budget.

When requests came from children that were outside the scope of what the project could address, some issues could be referred to other institutions or agencies, but others were unable to be addressed. JOFA partner staff members shared that they tried to manage this through careful planning and by speaking transparently with children to clarify what the project could or could not offer. In Ethiopia, a JOFA partner staff member shared that, "Most of the disappointments came through material or NFI-related complaints." It was also important to ensure that even if the request or complaint could not be addressed, it was responded to in a timely manner.

In Senegal, project staff found that consistently reviewing feedback received and subsequent project responses during quarterly focus group discussions with children beneficiaries kept communication open and transparent.

In Uganda, one JOFA partner staff member shared that providing timely responses to



feedback had sometimes been a challenge, for example, due to challenges or delays in finding the right partner or respondent to address the feedback.

### **Managing a wide range of mixed feedback from children and others**

Another challenge was that the feedback and complaints mechanisms in some countries elicited a wide range of mixed feedback from children and others.

Some children may not yet have developed the capacity to provide feedback in an organised way.

The teams were required to discern what was a complaint, as opposed to what constituted feedback, and how to address complaints received through JOFA but targeted to other agencies or institutions.

One JOFA partner staff member in Kenya said, "It has not been easy for children to differentiate between what point they are complaining, or what point they are speaking about the project, etcetera.

They are children. It has been the responsibility of the team to try and decide on what point the children are giving feedback on the project itself."

Strategies for addressing this were to engage children in training to better understand the feedback process and its objectives or to provide children with the opportunity to give feedback on a specific activity, rather than the project more broadly.

The receipt of anonymous feedback was also a challenge in cases where a personal response or follow-up was needed. This complex mixture of input also created challenges in relation to the monitoring of feedback, complaints and responses.

### **Lack of cultural precedence**

In some contexts, JOFA teams encountered challenges with a lack of cultural precedence or acceptability of using some accountability mechanisms. People were not initially comfortable using established mechanisms for project-related feedback, particularly where these mechanisms required written input.

To mitigate this challenge, children were encouraged to draw a picture of their thoughts for the suggestion box or to enlist the help of other children they trusted to help them write out their suggestions.

In Senegal, during a community meeting, JOFA team members also learned that suggestion boxes were not being used, as the preferred methods were by telephone or in face-to-face meetings. Phone access for children was also a challenge in some sites, where parents might not be open to giving their phones to their children for fear of being reported for negligence or abuse.

Language challenges. In some contexts, language barriers have also represented a challenge, particularly in refugee and conflict-affected settings. These language challenges hampered the collection of feedback and complaints from children. For example, in Kakuma, Kenya, children speak the languages or dialects of the locality and country from which they have arrived.

Disability inclusion. Finally, while there were clear examples of attempts to ensure that children with disabilities were included in feedback and complaints mechanisms, this continues to be a challenge for many teams. Staff in various JOFA countries described their efforts but also recognised that more work was needed. This is particularly due to the variety of disabilities among children, the lack of assistive devices, and the lack of capacity among field staff to identify and respond effectively to disability issues.

## KEY LESSONS

1. In a consortium approach, partners may have different existing child friendly community-based complaints and feedback mechanisms. **The JOFA project offered a set of common technical approaches with objectives, but partners had the flexibility to adapt existing approaches** or use their own approaches where they met shared objectives. This was a useful approach and allowed for culturally- and context-relevant adaptation.

2. Among JOFA partners, there were differences, generally, between how well-established child friendly feedback and complaint mechanisms were between humanitarian contexts (more established) and development contexts (less established). It may **take more time and input to reach a common threshold for partners with less established mechanisms**.

3. Staff reflected that for collecting feedback and complaints from children, it was **important to have a range of different mechanisms available with input from children**, rather than only using suggestion boxes which are often not feasible for children. Some noted the value of schools as a venue for collecting feedback and complaints from children. In a number of country settings, consistent, face to face feedback such as focus group discussions were particularly successful.

4. Staff also reflected on the **value of ensuring that child friendly feedback sessions were participatory and enjoyable for children**, and that girls and boys both had the opportunity to speak. In some contexts, separate meetings for girls and boys were useful.

5. **The need to maintain confidentiality and respond in a timely manner to feedback and complaints are essential factors** in maintaining the legitimacy and efficacy of child friendly feedback and complaints mechanisms. If a response is not possible, the reasons should be clearly communicated timeously.

6. It is important to **manage the expectations of children regarding what the project can and cannot offer**, to avoid the disappointment of children making requests that cannot feasibly be met. Discussions about the objectives and limits of feedback mechanisms from the beginning of project activities could be useful in this regard.

7. It is an **ongoing challenge for some partners to assess, address (and monitor responses to) the wide range of mixed comments, feedback, and complaints** that relate to the project, those that relate to other institutions or agencies, as well as those that relate to child protection concerns as maintaining these systems requires significant staff time and effort.





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