

LNG 5. Feeding Back to Communities the Key Findings from the Learning Phase

Introduction

Rationale

Feeding back to communities information from the learning phase is a priority for reasons having to do with ethics, research accuracy, and practice. The process of feeding back helps to avoid the ethical problems associated with a strictly extractive approach. Demonstrating respect and gratitude to the people of the participating communities, it is part of the learners' accountability to the communities. In addition, the feedback process provides a validation check, as it gives the participants the opportunity to identify possible inaccuracies in the findings or to offer clarifications. By including opportunity for collective reflection, the provision of feedback becomes part of the process of communities taking steps to strengthen child protection.

Objectives

The objectives of the feedback process are to:

- enable communities to learn from the key findings from the learning phase,
- check overall accuracy by asking whether these findings resonate or are inaccurate in particular respects, and
- invite reflection by community people on steps that they could take, without external support, to address harms to children and strengthen support for vulnerable children.

Methodology

The methodology will need to be adapted to the context and one's wider purpose. Also, it may need to be refined on the basis of what is learned in the initial one or two feedback sessions. Overall, though, there are three key steps:

- (1) Preparation for the feedback meeting
- (2) Presenting the key findings in a participatory manner, with discussion of whether they resonate
- (3) Collective reflection on the implications of the findings

Preparation

The first step in preparing to feed back is to meet with the top civil society leaders in the area, thank them for their support during the learning phase, explain the purpose of feeding the information back, and ask their support in doing so. In explaining the purpose of the meeting, it is important to recognize the challenges that children and families face, and affirm how important it is to learn together through dialogue about how to strengthen child protection mechanisms and processes. In this context, feeding information back and discussing the findings is part of the process of learning together what the community can do to strengthen its supports for vulnerable children.

It is important to avoid raising expectations by keeping the focus on what communities are already doing and what additional things they could do themselves to improve community child protection mechanisms and processes. However, if the Chief or community leader says that they would like help in addressing harms to children and one is receptive to helping, it is important to say so and to emphasize that the emphasis should be on what communities themselves do, noting that the role of the outsiders is to facilitate. One could add that this topic deserves further discussion and ask to have a follow-up meeting after the feedback to pursue this topic further.

In this meeting with the Chief or top leaders, it is useful to ask about when and where the meeting should be held and also about what arrangements could be made for food. This is respectful because it helps to schedule the meeting at a time and place where many people can participate. Typically, the Chief or other leaders can identify and offer without charge the space where the meeting should take place. To reciprocate, it can be useful to plan to provide food for the meeting, especially since participants may have to take time off from their business or farming in order to participate in the meeting. Usually, the Chief or the community organizes the food, with the outsiders paying the food costs and helping to pay the travel costs of people who will need external transport in order to participate in the meeting. This reciprocal arrangement helps to build a sense of local ownership without overburdening the community.

A full community meeting can be useful. However, it can also be useful to have a somewhat smaller meeting to allow greater discussion. In some contexts, it can be helpful to cap the meeting at under 50 participants and make sure that the invitees include people who are positioned in very different ways and with attention to issues such as gender, age, religious orientation, etc. It is critical to avoid a situation in which the participants are mainly the family and friends of the Chief.

At community level, the participants would include a mixture of leaders (e.g., Chief, elders, women's group leader, religious leader, teachers, youth group leader, leaders of important committees, etc.), and everyday people, including girls, boys, women, and men. Ideally, it will include also people who are not part of the community elite and who may be marginalized in important respects (e.g., out-of-school children). Particularly if one's aim is to help strengthen the wider child protection system, it is valuable to invite formal stakeholders. These could include district- or province-level social workers, health or education workers, Child Welfare Committee members, NGO child protection workers in the area, and city-level staff who help to oversee child protection.

Feeding back on the key findings

Typically, the meeting begins with prayers as are appropriate to the local context. Following a welcome and greeting by the Chief or leader, the facilitator (or mentor) greets people and puts them at their ease by saying that this is a “family meeting” and that “everyone should speak—man, woman, big, small.” Out of respect, the facilitator may add that “You know more than we do about children. You are grandmothers, aunties, mothers, sisters; you know more since you live with children.” This opening is consistent with the spirit of the learning, namely, that we had come to the community as students who seek to learn from local people. Also, this opening signals that the focus of this meeting is the community, not the outside learners.

The facilitator then thanks the Chief and the people for coming, thanking also all the people who had taken time to teach us about the good things the community does for its children. The facilitator also reminds everyone that “we are a community” and can speak openly with each other, and everyone’s view is welcome. The facilitator then tells everyone that he wants to hear people’s views about children again today and will then share what the full community had taught us during the learning. The facilitator could add that it is always useful to check to make sure that we heard you correctly and our findings in fact reflect local people’s views.

To feed findings back in a participatory manner, the facilitator then asks the group some of the same questions that had been asked during the learning session, such as: “Who is a child?”, “What are some of the main harms to children here?”, and “What happens when those harms occur?” If participants say things or ask questions that do not relate to these questions, the facilitator respectfully puts them on the “parking lot,” recording them so people can discuss them later. Most participants see this as a respectful way of keeping on subject and not digressing onto topics such as farming, recent government actions, or other topics that do not relate directly to children and the learning phase results.

The skilled facilitator works through each question fully before moving to the next, asking probing questions as they go. For example, if in response to the question, “Who is a child”, someone says “A child is someone who cannot do things for himself—he depends on parents”,

the facilitator could ask “What do others think—is that what a child is?” If several people affirm this view, the facilitator could add that “This too is what the full community told us in the learning—the child is someone who is dependent.” The facilitator could then ask “What other things tell you someone is a child?” Other aspects such as age or doing children’s things, not engaged in sex, etc. might come up. For each of these, the facilitator probes and then describes the relevant result from the learning. Conducted in a lively back-and-forth exchange with a chant-like rhythm, this approach is highly engaging.

The facilitator also probes in regard to how similar are the learning findings with what the meeting participants just said, and any discrepancies could be discussed. Of course, some divergence could occur owing to the fact that the learning engaged with the full community, whereas only a subset of people, including people who are trained in international child protection, are in the meeting. Nevertheless, it is possible that something new such as “child selling” will come up even though it did not come up during the learning phase. This becomes an opportunity for asking probing questions aimed at learning more about when, where, how, and

why this happens, how widespread it is, what people do when they learn a child has been sold, etc. This information could be added to an addendum of the learning report or, better yet, could trigger some focused learning following the meeting in order to learn more fully about the issue.

Reflection on the implications of the findings

The meeting is also intended to be a reflective space that enables village people to explore what steps they could take on their own to help prevent or respond to particular harms to children. To some extent, this collective reflection might arise spontaneously, without prompting by the facilitator. For example, in the discussion of harms to children, people sometimes become impassioned about a particular issue and ask emphatically “What are we going to do about this problem?” This can be something of a magic moment that stirs the fires of collective empowerment and dialogue that could lead to community action. The skilled facilitator would likely let this discussion run long enough to help it gain traction and to affirm its importance. At the same time, the facilitator would likely point out that this question is so important that later in the meeting, we will have time to explore that question fully. The facilitator would likely add that it will be useful to reflect on what we should do when we have all the issues before us. Following the discussion of all the issues, the facilitator can then help the group to revisit its question: “What can we do?” to address the harms to children that have been raised. It is important to add that this is the first part of a longer discussion and that there is no need today to rush into final decisions, as there is a need to have a fuller discussion with the entire community.

The second way for the discussion to turn toward what communities could do to address the harms to children is for the facilitator to ask a question such as: “In regard to any of the harms that you just discussed, are there steps that the community could take, without outside help, to help address those needs? How could this be done?” Here, too, it is important to remind the participants that this is only the beginning of a longer discussion. To avoid raising expectations respectively, it is crucial to focus the discussion on what people can do without the support of outside agencies.

However the discussion about implications begins, the facilitator should promote an inclusive discussion by encouraging different people, including children, to speak. Also, the facilitator should ask questions that invite thinking about different options or ways of possibly addressing a particular harm to children. The discussion should close with a sincere thanks to the participants and by expressing one’s hope that these discussions will continue with the entire community.

If the question arises whether the learning group or the facilitator will continue working with the community, it is best to answer honestly but in a way that keeps the focus on the community and does not raise expectations too much. For example, one could say that we will be discussing some possible collaboration with the Chief in the days ahead. One could add that if the community wants us to stay involved, we would likely have a small role since the focus is on what communities themselves can do. It will not be like a large, international NGO coming in with lots of money. It would be more like us helping the community to do more of the thing it already does a lot on—caring for its vulnerable children.

Do No Harm considerations

Various Do No Harm issues should be managed as part of this feeding back process. Beyond the issue of raised expectations that was discussed above, there may be breaches of confidentiality that are harmful in themselves and that can stimulate gossip. During the discussions, if someone said “Yes, that problem happens here as just yesterday Ibrahim over there beat his son,” it would be crucial to intervene and explain that we are not here to discuss particular cases or individuals but want to learn and discuss wider practices in this area. It may also be useful to encourage people to engage in a dialogue process among themselves about how they can work collectively, without blaming or accusation, to care more effectively for their children. This problem-solving orientation should inform the discussions throughout.