

# **Children's Feedback Committees in Zimbabwe**

*An Experiment in Humanitarian Accountability*

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**Chris McIvor**  
with  
**Karen Myllenen**

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## Introduction

One of the major developments in the last few decades in the work of international and local charities is the increasing focus on the rights of beneficiaries in relation to the assistance delivered to them. In effect a change has taken place in the way in which individuals as ‘objects of charity’ have come to be regarded. People who receive aid have become increasingly transformed in the minds of their benefactors into real, live subjects who are entitled to inform the nature and extent of the programmes delivered on their behalf. The case for greater beneficiary participation is not only a moral but a practical one. Involvement of people in projects has consistently led to better programming results, particularly around the sustainability of interventions and the avoidance of excessive dependency that can arise if participation is minimized.

While the right of individuals to participate in charitable interventions is now widely respected as a key operating principle in development projects, the practice in terms of humanitarian work seems rather more murky. Pressures of time and the urgency to respond have often meant that beneficiaries targeted in emergency situations are not consulted about the appropriateness of aid or the mechanism of its delivery to them. The perception of people as passive victims continues to predominate in the media coverage of emergency situations, in the marketing strategies of the agencies that seek to respond, and in the minds of many of the staff who are in the front-line of delivery assistance. Despite the fact that accountability to beneficiaries is a recognized humanitarian principle, research has indicated that there is still considerable institutional ignorance about the nature and role of such standards in emergency programming. Claimed one report in 2003,

*Anecdotal evidence from evaluations of humanitarian action suggests that despite great efforts at promotion and dissemination over the past decade, a significant proportion of field workers are still not aware of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Code of Conduct.<sup>1</sup>*

The failure to adequately promote accountability of humanitarian programmes to beneficiary populations has several negative consequences. Assistance delivered in emergency situations can often be inappropriate if time has not been taken to find out what is required and what is acceptable to local communities. We have all read about or personally observed situations where, for example, inappropriate delivery of food aid has sometimes undermined local production through the distortion of markets or where the introduction of a food commodity through aid programmes has subsequently created a demand for something which cannot be locally produced. At the same time, if communities are marginalized in terms of decisions around emergency interventions they begin to manifest a culture of dependency that can be difficult to change when the intervention is over. When this happens agencies often blame local culture or ‘the laziness’ of the population for a problem which they in fact have helped to create. When Save the Children (UK) investigated the reasons as to why communities in the Zambezi Valley region of Zimbabwe were unwilling to participate in the control of a recent cholera epidemic, the lack of previous community engagement in decisions around a food-aid programme were cited by some as a reason for their subsequent lethargy.

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<sup>1</sup> *Humanitarian Exchange*, 2003. No. 24, July. London: Overseas Development Institute.

But perhaps one of the most serious consequences of the inadequate promotion of accountability to beneficiaries in humanitarian work is evidenced in the kinds of abuse perpetrated on communities by aid workers themselves. The 2002 study on sexual exploitation of young girls by aid personnel in West Africa on the back of an emergency intervention was disturbing, not only because of the nature of what it revealed, but because of the clear evidence of its widespread manifestation in many other emergency situations.<sup>2</sup> Quite clearly inequitable power relations can develop between those who give and those who receive in an emergency context. This can create a situation of extreme vulnerability for the latter unless a system is introduced to control it. Referring to the exchange of sex by young girls with aid workers in order to receive desperately needed humanitarian assistance in the camps in West Africa to which they had been relocated, one young woman claimed,

*They (aid personnel) change girls so much and none of them marry the girls and if she becomes pregnant she is abandoned, with no support for herself and the child. Most of us used to just look at them and wonder, "Our brothers, they have a problem".<sup>3</sup>*

Such behaviour of course would rarely be tolerated in the home locations from which aid workers themselves originated. Both community and legal sanction would prevent it from significantly occurring. Yet one wonders if the temptation to engage in such abusive behaviour would also be lessened if the perception of people as passive victims, as mere recipients of charity, were also changed. In other words the promotion of humanitarian accountability is not only about creating the systems through which such behaviour can be detected and prevented. It is also about transforming the perception of people from objects into subjects, of creating a realization in the minds of those who work in emergency environments that the beneficiaries we target are individuals with lives every bit as complex and significant as our own. Referring to the setting up of an Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to promote the elimination of sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian situations, one author concluded,

*The creation of an environment that is conducive to the prevention and elimination of sexual exploitation and abuse is key. Such an environment will include, at a minimum, enhanced beneficiary participation in all aspects of humanitarian programming, improved delivery mechanisms to reduce their potential for exploitation, and dissemination of information on beneficiary rights, entitlements, responsibilities and complaints procedures. Accountability to beneficiaries is a necessary step towards creating an environment that discourages sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>4</sup>*

This publication chronicles the attempt by Save the Children (UK) to set up an accountability project, related to the agency's food aid intervention in Zimbabwe that would address some of the issues raised above. From its conception in mid-2003, to the setting up of the project and final evaluation in May 2004, a key intention was to set up a mechanism that specifically included children in the process of creating better accountability towards communities. The focus on children was informed

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<sup>2</sup> Naik, Asmita, 2003. 'West Africa Scandal'. *Humanitarian Exchange*, No. 24, July. London: Overseas Development Institute.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 2 of 5.

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit. ft. 2.

by several considerations. Despite the fact that food aid interventions were meant to address the needs of vulnerable children there had been little attempt to solicit their constructive involvement either in the design, implementation or evaluation of the programme. In other words the agency was largely dependent on the community leadership having the interests of children at heart, despite previous evidence that this could never be taken for granted. In an evaluation conducted some years previously by the organisation in the same operational areas where food was being distributed, children had previously complained that the siting of wells and boreholes donated by the agency had often been prioritised in terms of their proximity to beer halls rather than to schools, clinics and homesteads. This was a decision, they claimed, motivated by a desire among some influential community members to have a regular supply of beer rather than have clean water for women and children to wash with and maintain proper family hygiene.<sup>5</sup>

Another reason for this focus on encouraging feedback from children was also prompted by previous experience in Zimbabwe of involving young people in assessing the value of the agency's work. This had often yielded information that was either deliberately concealed or simply not seen by adult informants. Despite discussions and debate with men and women in the Zambezi Valley concerning the value of the water programme, it was only when children were consulted that a different perspective of partisanship and bias within communities was revealed, one that was never noticed before. At the same time the extent of the role of children in water collection and management only came to light when the organization made an effort to find out from them directly how much time they spent on this activity. 'Our work is often invisible,' lamented one child during the study referred to above.

As the title of this publication indicates, the project was largely conceived as an experiment. This partly reflects the fact that there seems to be so few examples of setting up genuine accountability projects in humanitarian situations. SC's own search in Zimbabwe for replicable models revealed very little that it was able to choose from. Where feedback mechanisms had been established, both by our own programme in the past and by other agencies, there was a weakness in terms of setting up a mechanism that communities could genuinely call their own, that reduced the risk of potential perpetrators of abuse being in a position to conceal their behaviour, and that adequately informed beneficiaries of their rights and entitlements so that meaningful and constructive dialogue could take place. As for children, there was no evidence of their systematic involvement in any community complaints channels that had been set up. As is the nature of all experiments, mistakes were made and the project went through several modifications and changes during the course of its establishment. We would not do justice to the complexity of the endeavour if these problems were not revealed and appropriate lessons shared. This publication, therefore, is not offered as a blueprint or model to be rigorously followed. But we believe that there are sufficient and significant positive results to hopefully encourage other agencies to make the attempt at putting into practice a key humanitarian principle that to date has largely remained theoretical rather than concrete.

Chris McIvor

Director: Save the Children(UK). Harare.

January, 2005

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<sup>5</sup> SC (UK), 2000. 'If We Were Properly Consulted – A Review of the Save the Children (UK), Watsan Programme in the Zambezi Valley'. Harare: Save the Children (UK).

## Why Children's Feedback Committees?

Over the last few years, due to a combination of drought, economic decline, low agricultural productivity and the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS, a significant humanitarian operation has been under way to feed Zimbabwe's people. During the peak of the hungry season from November 2003 to April 2004 some four to five million people (about 40 per cent of the population) were recipients of food aid. This was largely delivered through non-governmental organizations supported by international donors, unlike in previous drought years when such assistance was primarily delivered through national government structures.

In order to identify people in need, agencies largely utilized community meetings, supported by traditional structures of leadership such as chiefs, headmen and councillors. Local leaders would convene community gatherings where agency personnel explained the criteria for selection of beneficiaries. After these criteria were explained the community was then tasked with producing an initial registration list. This was subsequently checked by humanitarian agencies through household verifications and further meetings. Committees were then set up to notify people of when food aid would be delivered, to assist with distributions and to participate in the monitoring of households subsequent to delivery.<sup>6</sup>

On paper at least, community involvement in humanitarian assistance in Zimbabwe looked significant. Yet there were signs that it was not as extensive as first appeared. Save the Children officers, for example, were regularly confronted by vulnerable families in their areas of operation who complained that they had been excluded from registration for a variety of reasons. This included child-headed households who claimed that because of their lack of visibility and influence in community affairs they were often left out when lists of beneficiaries were drawn up. To explore some of these concerns the organization carried out a survey in August 2003 in its three operational areas of Zimbabwe.

Community members claimed that explanations of selection criteria were inadequate. They had little opportunity to ask questions and noted either an uncertainty or impatience when aid workers were quizzed on a particular issue of concern to them. Community gatherings were also identified as a potentially inappropriate method for beneficiary selection as people would be reluctant to dispute the inclusion of influential people who might not merit food aid, for fear of recrimination and possible persecution. Additional complaints included late deliveries, uncertain schedules and poor planning of distribution points many kilometres distant from homesteads. Several areas where food was delivered had no shade to protect people either against rain or sun, nor in some instances did they have adequate latrines or running water to eliminate the risk of cholera transmission.

In addition to sampling the adult beneficiary population, the above survey also included focus group discussions with 140 boys and girls between the ages of eight and sixteen. Child reports were substantially different from those of adults and included distressing input not captured through adult feedback channels. They cited failures to include child-headed or absent parent households in the

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<sup>6</sup> For more information see, Mathys, Ellen, 2004. 'Community Managed Targeting and Distribution of Food Aid'. London: Save the Children (UK).

registration process. Community gatherings did not seek child participation, and household verifications failed to focus on them as a group that needed to be consulted. When child-headed households were included on beneficiary lists, in many instances no information was given to them about their entitlements, roles and responsibilities. Finally, children indicated that they were unwilling to make complaints within the community or to agency staff for fear that food aid might be terminated. This was an observation echoed by adults and children alike. No independent, friendly and accessible mechanism of feedback had been set up, and people were left with the impression that the agency did not particularly value what they had to say.

Both the results of the survey and discussions with other agencies led Save the Children (UK) to the conclusion that accountability of humanitarian operations in Zimbabwe to populations in need was insufficient. In general the monitoring practices established by programmes seemed to have more to do with signalling a compliance to donor requirements rather than creating a genuine mechanism of communication with people in receipt of food aid. Of particular concern was that the channels of feedback established were often set up by the very agency staff against whom complaints might have been made, the field officers responsible for organizing distributions. Fear of retribution and potential elimination from food aid registers were cited as a reason by both adults and children as to why they felt unable to speak out. The above findings, paired with Save the Children (UK)'s commitment to including children in all levels of programming, led to the genesis of the Child Feedback Committee (CFC) pilot project in August/September 2003.

### **Formulating a Strategy**

Prior to determining the location where the pilot project would be implemented, discussions were held at national, provincial and district levels to seek approval from the relevant local authorities for the proposed activities. Save the Children (UK) had two areas in mind where substantial food aid deliveries had taken place. These were the Binga district of the Zambezi Valley and the informal mining community of Mutorashanga in north-west Zimbabwe.

While local authority permission was granted in the case of the latter, Binga district proved too problematic in terms of establishing the project. The intense political rivalries that are evident in this location affected the willingness of the authorities to countenance an activity where substantial consultation with children was to take place. The proposed committees, for example, were seen by some as a means of rallying youth to a particular political cause. It was also clear that some officials in the area felt threatened by a process whereby the registration lists they had helped established were to be scrutinized by members of the community who might have genuine grounds for grievance. People in power, it seemed, were worried about creating a structure of accountability that in turn might lead to a questioning of their own authority. It is a short step, remarked one of Save the Children (UK)'s field staff in the Zambezi Valley, from getting people to question the value and worth of a food aid delivery programme to begin to ask questions as to why they were hungry in the first place. This was a discussion that for Binga district at least, was too controversial to accept.

#### **Box Muroshanga: Informal Mining Community**

In the end Mutorashanga was established as the site of the intended pilot. Through previous work undertaken with children in the programme, it was clear that if the project was to succeed, the support and approval of adult members of the community would be required. To help achieve this, several meetings were held with the traditional leaders and local councillors in the district to explain the

intention of the programme and to provide reassurance around some of their latent concerns. One issue raised at these meetings was the fear among some adults that involving children in such an activity would begin to challenge their own authority and undermine traditional structures of parental control and cultural hierarchy. This was not an easy debate to handle. It became clear, moreover, that some suspicions remained despite the examples and case studies provided from other locations where the involvement of children had yielded positive results both for themselves and the community. One secondary school-teacher from Mutorashanga commented on the reasons why parents and youths were cautious and urged them to support the programme in the following words,

*It has been tradition to look down upon our children and just simply pour information into them as if they don't think. We tend to forget that they are human beings, people who can make meaningful contributions. They have knowledge with them which they can only express and share with others if given the support to do so.*

Subsequent to the process of community sensitization it was decided to set up seven feedback committees spread throughout the district where food aid was delivered. Each committee would consist of around seven children between the ages of ten and seventeen, whose prime responsibility was to collect information and feedback from their peers about the programme. These child representatives were to be selected by other children in their respective communities. The only criteria set by the organisation was that the children chosen should be a member of a household in receipt of food aid, that an appropriate gender balance was to be struck in relation to the composition of each group, and that they would have time to attend training in such areas as information gathering, documentation and reporting skills, as well as the principles and practice behind food aid targeting and delivery.

To heed lessons learnt by the IASC task force, which had looked at other emergency situations where concerns about potential bias in the collection of information had been raised, a more independent channel of communication was also deemed necessary.<sup>7</sup> For the CFC project this had two dimensions. Firstly the concept of an independent 'Ombudsperson' was generated, who was to act as a key point of contact between the selected children in Mutorashanga and a hearing committee to whom feedback and grievances were to be directed.

The Ombudsperson had several responsibilities, which included the continuing sensitization of adult community members around the progress of the project, the management of the selection and training of CFC members, and the subsequent collection of information from the children through the committees that had been set up. Following the completion of the training it was envisaged that the Ombudsperson would conduct fortnightly visits to each of the seven committees in Mutorashanga, both to gather the feedback received and to offer continuous support to the children during this period. It was clear that much of the success of the project would depend on the personality and skills of this key person, in particular their ability to establish a relationship of trust so that the children would feel comfortable in disclosing issues of considerable sensitivity. At the same time they had to inspire

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<sup>7</sup> The Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Force on 'Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises' was set up in 2002 and chaired by UNICEF and OCHA.

sufficient confidence among parents and community leaders to allay the concerns raised at the start of the programme.

After a series of interviews in October 2003, Shallin Razawu, a young woman of 25, was recruited for this post. What informed the decision by the selection committee was the mix of ‘youthfulness’ and ‘maturity’ that she displayed during the interviews. Shallin’s outgoing personality and obvious ability to interact with children from a variety of ages and backgrounds, was complemented by technical expertise in monitoring and evaluation of food-aid programmes with several international agencies. Shallin had no illusions about the complexity of the post or the challenges she would face, and remembers some of the reservations she felt at the time,

*Initially I was afraid of the community. Since youth are a touchy political issue in this country, the thought of setting up committees with children intimidated me a bit. At the same time I had never done a project where I had to take the lead. There would be a challenge of talking to local and provincial authorities and receiving their support. Gaining acceptance from the children was another task I feared. Previously there had been emphasis on getting a “mature” and “motherly” person, of which I thought I was neither. In fact I felt like a kid who would be asked to lead other children, which was a view reinforced by some of the staff in the organization. This affected my confidence a bit but in the end turned out to be one of my most useful tools when I started working with the children.*

The second decision – made in order to limit a potential bias in relation to information management – was to ensure that the group to whom complaints were forwarded included non-agency personnel. It was felt that if Save the Children (UK) were to remain the only recipient of feedback provided by CFCs, the model created would be deficient. It would simply be another case of an agency policing itself, where the willingness to respond to and acknowledge potentially uncomfortable feedback would depend on the goodwill of the persons and institution implicated. This resulted in the formation of a Hearing Committee that comprised four members, only one of whom belonged to SC (UK). The board included a representative of the agency’s principal donor (DfiD), government representation through the district social welfare officer responsible for Mutorashanga, a representative of the World Food Programme (WFP) to provide some technical expertise in this area, and the director of SC (UK) in Zimbabwe.

The Ombudsperson was line-managed through this structure. It was agreed that Board members would meet on a monthly basis, both to hear the feedback received and to formulate a response to the issues raised. In order to ensure that the children in the committees were kept apprised of any decisions made in response to their concerns, the Ombudsperson was tasked with providing them with feedback as to the nature of the Board’s deliberations. It was felt that this two-way flow of information was crucial in order to generate trust and transparency, since committees had formerly complained of an extractive process of information gathering when it came to humanitarian operations in Zimbabwe. For the donor representative on the board, the presence of DfiD at this table offered several advantages.

*DfiD representation on the Hearing Committee provided a more direct link of accountability between donor and beneficiary communities than is normally possible through traditional agency reporting channels, which are more regulated*

*in timing and content and focus on the donor/agency relationship. At the same time by directly including DfID in the pilot project, Save the Children (UK) also ensured our continued support for such an initiative. This is evidenced by the interest expressed in this model by DfID's other implementing partner agencies in Zimbabwe.*

## Through the Eyes of Children<sup>8</sup>

Jesca Pedzura is seventeen years old and was the vice-chairperson of the Children's Feedback Committee set up in central Mutorashanga. Her family began receiving food aid in 2004 after poor rainfall left them unable to produce enough maize on their small plot of land. Money, she claimed, was also a problem since employment was in short supply in the district. Many families could not afford to buy food or raise the funds to send their children to school.

### Selection

She remembers that day in November when her mother came home from a meeting she had attended in the local football stadium with the news that all children below the age of eighteen were invited to gather there the following day. Some officers of the organization that provided them with food wanted to talk to them and to set up a committee of children who would represent community issues in discussions with them. Jesca was in two minds to attend the meeting, both because she was not sure whether it would be worth her time and because she did not think that she would be chosen to represent anyone. It was her mother who, in the end, persuaded her to go.

*In the stadium', she recalls, 'the Save the Children officers introduced themselves and informed us what they wanted. Then the time arrived to choose our representatives. The criteria used was the most reliable one where people were nominated and other children would line up behind the person they wanted to represent them. The committee was to have seven people. The gender was that of four girls and three boys in order to prove that a girl is also capable of doing things. My heart leapt when out of the blue I heard someone calling my name. I thought I was dreaming but it was real. I was called up front to be seen by everyone so that they could vote for me or turn me down. To my surprise I came up with the second largest number of votes so I became the Vice Chairperson.*

The selection process was found to be popular among the children in all the locations where CFCs were established, who claimed that it instilled a clear sense of ownership. At the same time the pressure to successfully fulfil their duties when chosen by their peers, was a point articulated by many of them. The challenge, however, for children who had never been exposed to such a process of consultation before was also intimidating. One child elected to a committee in Sutton mining community claimed,

*I was ashamed when I was appointed as vice-chairperson who will represent children in solving problems they face in the community. I was afraid because I*

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<sup>8</sup> Much of this section presents the views of children involved in the actual programme. The interviews were largely conducted in English, which is not their first or preferred language of communication. Rather than interpret what children might have meant, however, the editors have chosen to reproduce their actual words. But we need to be aware that the expressions used may well have different connotations for these children than the ones we automatically assume ourselves. For example one of the children says that she was 'ashamed' to be asked on to the committee, but we believe that she meant she was shy.

*had little experience of dealing with problems in my own life or socializing with others in the community.*

In general the process of selection of children was also accepted by most communities with the exception of one location where adults insisted on ‘vetting the candidates’. Community elders felt that this was necessary to eliminate the inclusion of ‘naughty’ children in the group. Although none of the children elected by their peers was in the end disqualified, such an instance does highlight that the novelty of child participation in many communities raises concerns among adults who have not been exposed to this before.

## **Training**

Several weeks later Jesca and her colleagues from the other committees were asked to attend a training workshop so that the project could be explained in detail and their roles and responsibilities more clearly specified. She recalls the trepidation and excitement she felt at the prospect of spending several days away from her family. ‘I marvelled at the thought of going to a hotel because I had never been in one since I was born. I wondered what new experiences awaited us’.

The workshops were facilitated by the Ombudsperson, assisted by other children from the agency’s ‘Child Advisory Board’. This was a structure set up several years previously comprising a group of about fifteen children from the organization’s operational areas whose role was to provide advice and feedback on the overall direction and content of SCs work in Zimbabwe.<sup>9</sup> Considerable care was taken to ensure a child friendly environment where committee members, some of whom were as young as ten and eleven, would feel safe exploring both novel and sensitive issues. Claimed Reuben Mkansi, a member of Sutton CFC,

*If you are working with children you have to be friendly to us so that it will be easy for us to tell you the problems we face in the community. We should not be harassed or forced because we will be afraid to tell you our problems.*

In addition to educating children, a major purpose of the exercise was to uncover existing knowledge levels among them around the topics covered. Songs, drama, games and visual aids facilitated the introduction of each topic where children explained their existing perceptions to the facilitators. This included their understanding of what was meant by the concept of child rights, how they might recognize child abuse among their peers, what they understood by community targeting of food aid, and what initial insights they might have on the nature of the agency’s humanitarian work in their respective communities. Jesca relates her experience of what she learned in the workshop in the following words,

*The workshops were a mixture of fun and learning. We learnt more about the food-aid programme, where the food came from, which mode of transport they used and how and where it was stored in warehouses until it was transported to the final destination. We learnt about the criteria used to select the beneficiaries and who they should be. In this case they comprised orphans, disabled and elderly people, and children from vulnerable families. We also learnt about the monthly*

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<sup>9</sup> See, SC, 2003. ‘The Children’s Advisory Board – Initial Experiences’. Harare: Save the Children (UK).

*rations necessary for an individual and how these had been worked out by the organization.*

*As to our future task we understood that this was to hear problems faced by children in our community as well as working with adult food aid committees. We were to report any exploitation of children and whether the food was taken to the correct beneficiaries or not. We were also going to teach others, both adults and children some of the things we had learnt at the workshop. After all this work we would then give an effective feedback of what was going on to the Ombudsperson, including our own recommendations as to what should be done. Save the Children (UK) would then look for possible solutions to the problems we had seen.*

The local leadership and several councillors from Mutorashanga were also invited to attend the workshop sessions. Following each day of training children were asked to provide these adults with a presentation on what they had learnt. By including prominent adults in the community, transparency surrounding sensitive issues, such as child abuse and how anomalies in the food-aid programme would be detected, was increased. Adults commented that they not only felt more comfortable with children from their community participating in the project, but that they were also learning too. Claimed one of the food aid managers present at the workshop,

*The methodologies used were suitable for the ages of children involved. All the knowledge dispersed during the workshops capacitated the children, even for their future development. The idea of involving local leaders in the training workshops was great as it removed any suspicions.*

Mr Julius, a teacher at Murorashanga Secondary School commented,

*The facilitator was very good as there was not much of a big generation gap. Children could easily identify with her and the facilitator could go to the children's level. Adults could do the same, but younger people surpass them by their extra vigour and energy.*

### **Reports: information collection and community responses**

One of the aims of the workshop was to establish a system for both the children to collect feedback from their peers and for these subsequently to be presented to the Ombudsperson for onward referral to the Hearing Board. In December the CFC members began to collect this information in their home communities. Feedback on the food-aid programme and other issues of concern was collected through home visits, informal discussions with children at school or during play, written reports received from their peers as well as the CFC members' own observations regarding their experience of the food-aid programme. The fifteen-year-old chairperson of the Mutorashanga CFC had the following observations,

*We would gather children during the distribution days and ask them [about] their problems, for instance discussing any form of abuse arising from the food-*

*aid programme. We also had interviews with adults and gathered information from our school friends. Most reports were of children being physically abused, especially when carrying the food home. Some children were also told to work for their food. Adults wanted to talk about such things as ration sizes or their concern that not enough family members were included in distribution targets. A difference between the reports given by children and adults is that adults tend to hide some scenarios while children are more honest and can point to negatives.*

Jesca had the following remarks on the collection and content of the information they gathered.

*Basically our reports tried to cover everything that was presented to us. They focused a lot on child abuse. Most of the reports made between adults and children were different. For instance children reported about neglect, sexual as well as physical abuse, whereas adults wanted to talk about the food aid. Some adults made reports to try to convince us to help them benefit from the programme. They also complained about the selection criteria because some people voted for their relatives only. I think the procedures taken to collect information were quite successful. The Ombudsperson also supported us in that she constantly came for our feedback so we were never unsure of the way forward.*

#### **Box: Criteria of Abuse Linked to Food Aid.**

Through fortnightly visits to each of the seven communities where CFCs had been established, the Ombudsperson collected both verbal and written feedback from the children. A general debriefing meeting with all members was held during each visit to provide them with a forum to discuss the information they had collected and the challenges they faced. As part of the workshop training, and reinforced during regular support visits, the importance of maintaining confidentiality when dealing with sensitive issues was continually re-emphasized. The organization did not want to allow a situation to develop where disclosure of child abuse, for example, might lead to further persecution of the child concerned or public condemnation of the alleged perpetrator before the proper channels of investigation and protection had been mobilized. This was one reason why the presence of a representative from the Ministry of Social Welfare, tasked with dealing with such issues, was so important during discussions with the children and meetings of the Hearing Committee.

#### **Box: Child Abuse Linked to Food Aid taking place in each Community**

The Ombudsperson also picked up some concerns from the CFC members about their potential stigmatization within the community, their worry that they would be seen as agency spies who had the power to strike individuals off the food aid registers. This prompted the delivery of a clear message both to the children themselves and the wider community that no one would be directly removed from food aid lists if a committee member claimed that they were undeserving. If consistent feedback was received around anomalies in the selection process Save the Children (UK) programme staff would expand their existing household monitoring surveys to establish the continued relevance of the existing register.

At the same time great care was taken to explain the exact entitlements of beneficiaries under the programme, so that the committees did not become the unwitting channel of attempts to leverage other inputs that Save the Children (UK) was not in a position to deliver. Nevertheless pressure was exerted on children, either through bribes or threats, to seek the inclusion of someone into the food-aid programme when it was clear that they did not meet the criteria for targeting. Referring to her experiences within the community as a committee member, Jesca claimed,

*As a CFC member sometimes I would meet problems here and there such that I would become frightened. It's like in our community there is a strong belief in witchcraft so people would talk about me, saying that I am now 'a child of Save the Children' because I travelled in their transport. Remarks like this frightened me and I thought I would be bewitched. Most people, however, supported the fact that I worked with the organization and encouraged me to attend the workshops and training and carry out my roles and responsibilities. At school I never met any problems with either teachers or students and I gave myself enough time to read such that I managed to come up with a pleasing examination result.*

#### **Box: Community Misconceptions Highlight the need ...**

##### **Feedback channels**

As previously stated the Hearing Committee sat once a month to receive feedback on CFC observations. During these meetings the Ombudsperson presented a report based upon three categories for organizing information. This consisted of:

- a) Feedback of a general nature related to the food aid process.
- b) Feedback involving allegations of abuse or exploitation of children linked to the programme.
- c) Feedback involving allegations of abuse or exploitation of children unrelated to the humanitarian assistance the organization provided.

The Hearing Committee would then deliberate on the findings of the feedback committees and issue decisions regarding the programme based on this discussion. Following each Hearing Committee meeting the Ombudsperson would in turn debrief the children on the response to their reports and the actions that would be taken to address any concerns that had been raised. It was emphasized that children also had a role to play in disseminating this feedback to their own communities. Claimed the chairperson of the Mutorashanga CFC committee,

*After workshops or meetings we would gather children and tell them about what had happened. Young kids were not so interested but secondary school children understood what we were talking about and were interested. To adults we would mostly talk about food distribution and where we could, answer questions they had about the programme. I believe that it was us more than anyone else who helped*

*them to understand that vulnerable children were the ones that were supposed to benefit from the assistance given.*

During a survey conducted in March/April 2004 by the food aid monitoring unit of Save the Children it was noted that the understanding of the process of food aid, and the issues surrounding child protection and care, had noticeably improved within the Mutorashanga community. This was attributed to the dual process of children disseminating information back to their communities and Save the Children (UK) staff taking more time at distribution points to explain the programme and how it operated. Claimed one mother of a CFC member,

*I have learned a lot from my daughter about the role and aim of the feedback committees and especially on the food-aid programme. My understanding of the programme grew because of my daughter. Before the committees were formed I was not well aware of the selection criteria, why we were benefiting, or how ration sizes were determined per household.*

## **What the Children Said**

The feedback received from the Children's Committees regarding the impact of food aid upon their own lives and that of the community in Mutorashanga disclosed information that was not picked up through normal agency reporting channels. The latter had generally raised community concerns around ration sizes, the beneficiary selection process and the timing of deliveries. Save the Children had rarely captured the post distribution aspects of food aid as revealed by children on the CFCs. This confirmed the organization's conviction that children do have a significant role to play in effective monitoring not only of development programmes but emergency operations as well.

### **About our Emergency Programme and child abuse**

Regarding food distribution at home the children reported that:

- Food was not being distributed equitably at the household level. Fostered children and orphans who were intended as principal beneficiaries of food aid did not receive a fair share of the family ration.
- Guardians often used food as payment for the completion of household tasks, which at times involved laborious activities inappropriate for children. Withholding food as a punishment was also noted as common practice.
- Fostered children, or those under the supervision of a step-parent, regularly slept without eating, even when food was available, or were only fed once a day.
- Some fathers would sell off part of the rations received in order to purchase non-essential items such as beer. Children also commented that food was frequently bartered for other commodities and while some of these were of benefit to the entire family (such as soap, blankets, pots and pans), the commodification of food could lead at times to abuse by more influential members of the family.

The CFCs also revealed a common practice of children being sent to collect family rations from food distribution points. They listed the following as being detrimental to their rights to growth, development and dignity.

- Children, some as young as ten or eleven, frequently ended up carrying heavy loads for long distances, a practice which reportedly led at times to adults outside the family being given a part of the ration to help them carry it.
- Children were often exposed to bad language, injury and rowdiness at distribution points, if deliveries were delayed or dissatisfied community members were present.
- Many children ended up missing school during days when food aid was distributed. Children asked for distributions to be carried out during school holidays or weekends, a request which was positively considered by the organization.

- In the traditional cultural role of ‘child as helper’, they were often requested to off-load food at distribution points despite the heavy loads and arduous tasks involved in this exercise.

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### **Box Impact of Food Distribution in Mutorashanga**

A common observation of CFCs was that there was considerable confusion within the community about the nature, rationale and management of food aid. Not enough time, they claimed, had been spent by the organization in discussions with the community both to present the programme and respond to questions that might have arisen.

- The children revealed that there was considerable community disapproval of a cut-off point for family rations at five members. This was perceived to be unfair as many families had in excess of five members due to the fostering of children whose parents had died of HIV/AIDS.
- Community members initially perceived the rationale for a cut-off point as an attempt by the organization at discriminating against large families. The children stated that when they were informed that ‘there was not enough food aid for everyone’ and that the organization wanted to spread limited resources to a wider number of families, both their own and community attitudes changed on this issue. But what this pointed to was poor communication by the organization about the reasons for such decisions.
- There were reports by the committees of agency staff being implicated in ‘the stealing of food’. On investigation this turned out to be the return of food to the warehouse when some families had not turned up to collect their rations. But the perception of theft created considerable animosity at times, something which could have been avoided if appropriate communication had been forthcoming from agency staff.
- The CFCs were generally appreciative of the commitment, honesty and transparency of the food aid officers assigned to their communities. But in one location they reported that a member of the team was irritable, quick-tempered, yelled at people waiting for food at distributions, and seemed unwilling to answer questions. The children recommended training for food aid officers on community communication skills, a suggestion which was followed up in subsequent training.

The CFC committees also made observations around their perceptions of the overall impact of food aid in the community. While there was a general consensus that the food was beneficial, that it allowed families to cope with their difficult circumstances and prevented children from fainting at school due to hunger, there were some concerns raised as well.

- Children noted that some adults in the community had become ‘lazy’. When the necessity of a community enterprise was raised they would remark that, ‘Save the Children will come and do it for us’.

- Children worried about the longer-term impact of food aid in the community. They suggested that instead of free handouts, food for work (where individuals were able to do so) would be more appropriate to help avoid dependency.
- Children commented on the community divisions that were created when people occasionally appeared on the register who were not the most needy. This undermined a spirit of community solidarity and prompted attempts by some adults at bribery, in order to promote their inclusion on the lists of beneficiaries.

### **Child Abuse**

A disturbing number of reports were forwarded by CFC members regarding the abuse or exploitation of children unrelated to food distribution activities. Such allegations regularly involved the mistreatment of orphaned or fostered children in their new homes, or by step-parents who would frequently prioritise their own children's needs over that of others in the family. Allegations of physical abuse such as beatings at home, excessive child labour and emotional abuse all surfaced in the CFC reports.

In many ways the issue of child abuse within the family proved to be the most difficult of all the problems the agency had to address. While many of the CFC recommendations were relatively straightforward to deal with, since it involved a change to procedures that the organization was in control of, dealing with internal family dynamics turned out to be a bigger challenge. At the same time the agency needed to ensure that disclosure of abuse would not result in further harm to the child concerned. Through a mixture of community sensitization, the close involvement of the relevant government department, and the attempt to create a culture within which abuse would not be tolerated by neighbours and community leaders some signs of progress were evident by the time the pilot was completed. Claimed one local councillor,

*CFC members are now more informed on child abuse and can now identify and report it through the proper channels. For example, a CFC member came to report a child that had been severely beaten by his stepmother, until his hand was swollen and broken and he could not go to school that day. I went to investigate the case and found the child at home and talked to the mother who I left with a strong reproach for what she had done. I never revealed the source of the report. I acted as if I was just passing through and asking why the child was at home rather than at school.*

### **About the participation process**

In terms of the actual project itself, CFC members had several observations to make.

- The importance of the Ombudsperson's role was seen to be critical in the success of the project. The interpersonal skills, organizational management and adaptive strengths of this particular individual strongly influenced the quality of feedback provided by the committees.

*We felt comfortable with Shallin, claimed a member of the CFC committee in Mutorashanga Central, because she was able to mix with children and identify with us. She was very sociable towards us and helped us by explanation and encouragement. For example, with problems of abuse, if children reported that they were scared of being blamed for intervening in someone's family affairs, she would give us words of encouragement so we would not feel frightened. We would then feel free to report knowing that there was someone to give us guidance.*

- The children unanimously voted their time at the training workshops as the most enjoyable and informative part of the process. Encouraging them to explain what they already knew about each topic prior to 'formal teaching' prevented boredom and enhanced a sense of ownership of the information. It also allowed the Ombudsperson to focus on those areas where children lacked sufficient information or understanding. But most importantly it signalled a genuine interest on the part of the organization to listen to and respect their views, to provide them with a voice which they had rarely been granted before. Claimed Shallin,

*I was very happy with the contributions of children. I found it a very worthwhile cause, as I discovered that children are often underestimated. There was a lot of knowledge in them that I didn't know was there simply by looking at their faces. The moment I gave them a voice, it was for me and other adults to adjust and see for ourselves that there was such a meaningful contribution from these unreadable faces.*

- The children pointed out that training them to become effective agents of information collection and dissemination, and providing them with exposure around their rights and entitlements, occasionally created opposition from some community members. This had both a political dimension, as well as a cultural one around age and the perception by some elders that they should be seen and not heard. Some children claimed that they had been 'harassed' as a result of their activities, and emphasized the importance of regular discussion by agency personnel with parents, guardians and local leaders to win their endorsement of the role they had been assigned.

*When the training first started, claimed a local councillor in Mutorashanga, some community elders were afraid of children being trained outside the community and in their absence. They were afraid that the children might expose corruption that had taken place and would be looking at them and scrutinizing their every movement to report to Save the Children.*

Children reported numerous positive outcomes due to their participation in the committees. In a survey conducted of CFC members they came up with the following list of benefits that had arisen as a result of their inclusion in the project:

- Introduction of new places and people through training workshops
- Increased feelings of self-esteem

- Increased knowledge on the process of food aid
- Increased awareness on the rights of children in their community
- Feelings of self-efficacy in collecting, reporting and disseminating information in their communities
- Increased confidence in public speaking and socializing with other children and adults
- Improved school performance
- Increased confidence in their ability to make a positive impact in their community
- A desire to continue working to assist other children after CFC activities ended

*Confidence is the key, claimed another CFC member in Sutton. As children we should be confident enough to express what we are feeling. Older children also now give younger children room to participate and express their views.*

*‘These workshops helped us very much, said Ali Made, a member of another CFC committee. Now I know how worthy I am. Everything was exciting and good. These workshops helped me for now I know how to socialize with children and I also know my rights.*

The positive impact of the project upon the CFC members was not only noted by children themselves but by other adults in the community. Parents and guardians of CFC members, as well as local leaders and community leaders revealed the generally positive appreciation of what had transpired for their children as a result of the experience they had gained.

*The Children’s Feedback Committees, one mother told us, gave them time to interact and stay away from trouble. They were equipped with information on child rights. The children managed to get feedback from their peers and keep it confidential. They gained leadership skills and learned to respect one another, especially children in more difficult circumstances. My own daughter has changed the way she used to treat her stepbrother. She encourages everyone in the family to be more sensitive to his needs.*

*My daughter’s personality was positively affected by her participation in the CFCs, claimed another parent. She used to have many friends of the opposite sex, would come home late and rarely studied. But all that has changed. Her teacher even commented on the way her schoolwork has improved.*

## Conclusion and Lessons Learnt

Despite the limitations of scale and geographic coverage, the pilot project established in Mutorashanga has offered the Save the Children (UK) Zimbabwe programme some valuable lessons in relation to improving accountability to beneficiaries of humanitarian interventions. In fact it can probably be stated that the agency underestimated the ability of children to provide a range of useful and important feedback in order to improve the quality of its service delivery.

Yet the obstacles and challenges that the project encountered need also to be acknowledged. This included the reluctance at times of field staff to have their work scrutinized by people who have traditionally been cast in the role of recipient rather than critic. While it is to the credit of the food aid team that their initial reservations did not translate into an obstructiveness towards the project, such tensions need to be noted.

At the community level there is also little doubt that accountability is sometimes seen as a dangerous political concept that can undermine local hierarchies. Traditional power structures can feel threatened by providing encouragement to normally docile community members to question the assistance that is delivered to them. That culture of consultation can prove difficult to subsequently control. The creation of a democratic space in one area of people's lives can lead to an expectation that it will or should be available in relation to other decisions that affect them. In the intense, politically charged atmosphere current in Zimbabwe today such a development may not be always welcome. These power dynamics are also revealed when children challenge a common stereotype of them as passive, obedient and unquestioning. Child participation in many communities can be seen as a means of introducing an unwelcome orientation, a spirit of unruliness that threatens parents and adult control. A significant part of the pilot project involved close interaction and discussions with guardians, teachers, local leaders, etc. to allow such a space to develop and to provide reassurances that with appropriate consultation children can also acquire a greater sense of duty and responsibility. In the end what best convinced the adult community of the value of children's participation in Mutorashanga were not the arguments and justifications marshalled by the Ombudsperson and other Save the Children (UK) personnel, but the evidence of their own eyes as to the value of this process for their children. Claimed a local leader,

*CFC participants benefited as they socialized and learned to listen. They also gained life skills such as responsible decision-making and communication. If we had our way we could encourage more and more programmes of a similar nature.*

Of the range of issues raised by the committees, some proved more difficult to deal with than others. In general it was easy to respond to the criticisms voiced about the food-aid programme. Changing the timing of deliveries and the location of distribution points, and improving the quality of communication flow so that people better understood the rationale, management and organization of the emergency programme was relatively straightforward. These were issues that the organization was in control of and with minimum disruption could readily change.

It was much more difficult to deal with the issue of what happened to food after its collection by families. As is clear the CFCs provided the agency with a previously undocumented glimpse into

what happens in households after aid is delivered. The withholding of food from children who were stigmatized within particular families, the use of food to demand excessive work from children within the household, the diversion of rations from the family table to meet the requirements of guardians who preferred to sell it for beer etc are difficult to deal with precisely because they require the intrusion of an external agent into a very private and closed structure. At the same time no guarantees can be provided that after the reprimand is delivered, the family will not revert to previous practice and through intimidation and coercion ensure that affected children do not disclose such sensitive information again.

Despite the difficulties, the programme is of the opinion that considerable progress was made to address this issue. Efforts at sensitization in order to create a culture where community members themselves 'police' the behaviour of their neighbours if the above abuses were noted, led to some improvements according to the children themselves. At the same time the co-option of local leaders who command respect within communities to promote the realization of vulnerable children's rights also began to realize some changes in practice. According to the CFC chairperson for Mutorashanga Central,

*There were changes in the community, not big changes, but there were changes. Because of the committees there were places for children to give their views knowing that they are the target group. We now have knowledge of child abuse and how to cope if we want to reverse it. If there is any form of abuse, we can now help the abused person to report his or her problem using the Child Helpline. I also think the community itself has a better vision, as we now know we can help in food aid and what way to follow.*

The issue that perhaps most troubled the Hearing Committee relates to the cases brought to its attention of child abuse that were unrelated to the actual Save the Children (UK) food-aid programme. As indicated in the previous chapters numerous reports were received through the CFCs of physical, sexual and emotional abuse of children particularly in households where step-parents were present or where orphaned children were being cared for by relatives on the death of their parents. The challenge was to ensure that the disclosure of such information by a particular child did not worsen the situation for them and create expectations that could not be realized. The strong involvement of the relevant Ministry and the inclusion of police, teachers, nurses and local leaders in the campaign that was run to eliminate this problem in Mutorashanga was crucial to achieving some success. But the fact remains that child abuse seems to be on the increase in Zimbabwe at exactly the time when the structures and services set up to deal with it are weakening due to manpower shortages and declining resources. Without an adequate and robust protective mechanism there is no guarantee that a light rebuke from a concerned neighbour will lead to the prevention of abuse for a particular child in future.

As indicated by the members of the committees themselves, the project left them with a set of skills that will benefit them in future. This includes communication and information management skills, report writing and how to facilitate and organize meetings. At the same time the project provided an opportunity for children to perceive the value of consultation and the importance of listening to others as part of the process of creating a democratic space when community decisions are made. Claimed one CFC member,

*My life changed because I used to speak loudly, especially when I was criticized. But after being in a Child Feedback Committee I became used to hearing the ideas of others and have started to express my criticisms calmly.*

The project was not only a transforming experience for those who were elected to the committees, but for those who elected them since they could often see for themselves that children can play a role in informing community decisions that affect them. This was also witnessed by parents, guardians, teachers and local leaders who generally commended the children on their display of responsibility and constructive engagement with the issues they were asked to confront. That seed, it is hoped, should flourish and grow so that beyond the life of the actual project a commitment to child participation will remain and opportunities found for these new skills to be exercised.

When Jesca reflected on her experience of the CFC committees in which she played a prominent part, she had the following words to say,

*My experiences as a Child Feedback Committee member were the most mysterious and adventurous days of my life. I still miss them and wish they could come back. I feel improved academically by learning and wanting to become someone important.*

*Our community now knows a lot more about abuse and I believe awareness is now higher about the rights of children. I have not heard of ill treatment of foster children in Mutorashanga since the CFCs stopped and I think this is because of more awareness.*

## **General Guidelines for Future Programmes**

As stated in our introduction, the purpose of sharing the Child Feedback Committee pilot experience has not been to provide readers with an exact blueprint for future programming. It rather represents an initial attempt in an ongoing effort to improve humanitarian accountability to beneficiary populations.

Nevertheless we felt it useful to collect some of the key learning points delivered to the project in a separate section, for referencing by agency personnel interested in developing similar work in the future.

### **1. Community Sensitization**

- Senior agency staff must engage in discussions and obtain initial support from all relevant government ministries at national, provincial and district level before identifying communities of operation.
- Following approval at national, provincial and district levels, senior agency staff must consult and gain support from traditional leadership before engaging in community sensitization.
- All members of the community, children included, need to be informed about the aims, objectives and processes of the project. They should be given the opportunity to respond with their ideas and recommendations.
- Just as important as educating the community on the roles of committee members, is articulating what is *not* part of their duties (to avoid assumptions of unrealistic power of children over programme activities).
- Conduct sensitization not only at project inception, but at each stage of Committee activities throughout the life of the project.
- Use CFC member feedback regarding their experiences in the community as an indicator of the need for additional targeted sensitization efforts.
- Build relationships with community networks supporting children to increase sustainability of CFC activities.
- Agency staff, namely field staff in the area of project operation, requires sensitization on the purpose and objectives of CFCs just as community members do. Field staff need reassurance that their work is not being ‘policed’ by children to ensure their co-operation and support of project activities.

### **2. Selection and Role of Ombudsperson**

The process of recruiting for the Ombudsperson is crucial to the design of a CFC project, as this individual is key to encouraging children to participate in a meaningful manner.

- Individual must have experience in child rights and employing child participation methodologies.
- Children must be capable of identifying with the Ombudsperson as a ‘confidant’ rather than an authoritative figure (similarity in age, culture and language).
- The Ombudsperson must be capable of handling child reports with impartiality and confidentiality. The individual must maintain a high standard of professionalism at all times as mismanagement of information or crossing professional boundaries (for example, by becoming personally involved with cases of abuse) could place CFC members at risk.

The Ombudsperson co-ordinates all activities of the Child Feedback Committees and is the agent for channelling information directly to and from the community to the Hearing Committee. Responsible for sensitizing the community, the selection and training process of CFC members, and fostering a rapport with children that would encourage safe disclosure during the reporting process, the Ombudsperson is the intended ‘guarantor’ for independent information transfer. Following the selection and training of Child Feedback Committees, the Ombudsperson should conduct bi-weekly visits with each CFC, and present findings to the Hearing Committee on a monthly basis.

### **3. Selection of Children**

- Use child participation methodologies, whereby children choose children for CFC membership. This method was clearly shown to encourage ownership by elected children over project activities.
- Dialogue with community leaders and parents to gain support for child-based selection process. Where resistance occurs (as in case of community adults ‘vetting’ selected children in one community), be sensitive to community concerns and adapt process accordingly.

### **4. Training**

- Training must be conducted in the local language and encourage children to express themselves in the manner they are most comfortable with. For example, CFC pilot activities conducted all sensitization, selection and training exercises in Shona, the primary language used in Mutorashanga.
- Allow knowledge levels of participating children to guide training workshop content
- Employ a variety of child-friendly methodologies (song, drama, colourful posters and visual aids) to engage children in discussions.
- Use child feedback as informal community assessment to help identify community misconceptions surrounding the food aid process or rights of children.
- Adequately train children in the appropriate use of their voice during information collection and dissemination in the community to enhance protection.
- Do not ‘skimp’ on any aspects of training, be flexible in time and content, as the effectiveness of training will ultimately determine quality of reports from CFC members.

### **5. Information Collection and Support**

- Allow children to collect and report information in a manner they are comfortable with and coincides with prevailing cultural norms of child behaviour.
- Ombudsperson conducts fortnightly debriefing meetings to allow children to discuss as a group the information they have collected as well as any challenges they have faced.
- During these meetings, the Ombudsperson must identify any children with reports requiring confidentiality and conduct individual interviews following each debriefing.

## **6. Resource Allocation**

Implementing agencies should be aware that ensuring proper sensitization, selection, training and reporting for Child Feedback Committees is a resource intensive process. The agency must specifically take into account the time and travel requirements of the Ombudsperson to communities of operation in the design and budgeting of CFC activities.

## **7. Composition and Role of Hearing Committee**

The inclusion of non-agency personnel on the Hearing Committee was found to be an essential element of the CFC approach. Primarily, Hearing Committee representation eliminates the potential of the implementing agency to ‘censor’ feedback provided by children. In addition, the diverse capacities mobilised through Committee representation foster an environment of collective responsibility in responding to concerns raised by children. Co-ordination between agencies through Hearing Committee representation increases the quality of recommendations and capacity to respond to CFC reports.

Recommended representatives for future Hearing Committees include:

- Representative from principal donor
- Appropriate government delegate involved in Child Protection and Care
- Representative from humanitarian agency involved in similar programming
- Director or senior staff member of implementing agency

The Hearing Committee was designed to sit in monthly meetings to hear CFC feedback from the Ombudsperson. The mandate of the Hearing Committee was to redirect program operations in response to observations received and provide feedback to the children around their concerns.

## **8. Providing Feedback to Children**

- Following each Hearing Committee meeting, the Ombudsperson should debrief the Child Feedback Committees about the responses to their reports, and the recommendations forwarded for action.

- It should be emphasized that the child representatives disseminate Hearing Committee feedback to their communities once it is clear that a common and correct understanding of what this feedback is has been reached.

## 9. Responding to Abuse

Constant vigilance is required to protect, care and nurture Child Feedback Committee members. Some key elements of mobilising and training CFC members in a manner that mitigates risk of abuse or exploitation included:

- Do not create a false impression about what constitutes ‘child abuse’, or expectations about rights and privileges that may not be met within deprived communities. In conditions of extreme poverty, many of the ‘inalienable rights of children’ such as the right to education and adequate health care are absent. It is dangerous to create a sense of entitlement in children that their parents or caregivers may not be capable of providing. It is of critical importance that through training, children fully understand the difference between ‘hardship’ and ‘abuse’ when being encouraged to report on ‘rights based’ infringements within their communities.
- Agency must be prepared to respond to child disclosure. The implementing agency should do everything within its power to respond when a child is reported as being deprived. Fostering an environment that encourages child participation encourages disclosure of abuse or mistreatment. Having mobilised Social Services to participate in training activities and including a representative of Social Service on the Hearing Committee, Save the Children (UK) directed allegations of abuse to the appropriate channels for further investigation. As CFC activities were specifically *not* intended to replace existing community structures, SC (UK) was obligated to act only within the boundaries of its approved activities.

Developing direct linkages with relevant Ministries, local police, schools and community elders to respond to allegations of abuse or exploitation is critical. The development of a network of community members to respond to child reports also increases the sustainability of project operations once CFC activities end.

- Address potential ‘exploitation through knowledge’. In disadvantaged communities, knowledge is often held as a form of status and power by the knowledge-bearer which can both be abused by participating children and leave children susceptible to abuse or exploitation.

As part of training in information collection and dissemination, children must be trained in the use of their voice in a culturally acceptable manner. The children themselves raised such points through their list of ‘Do’s and Don’ts’ by including such ‘Don’ts’ as don’t discriminate against less advantaged children, abuse our peers, or humiliate the children we work with including other Committee members. It is important for children not to inflate their own status through their association with CFC activities, and be boastful or withhold information they receive through

training to assume power over people in their communities. Training of Child Feedback Committee members must assist children with methods of coping with any potentially abusive or exploitive situation their involvement on CFCs may create.

Assess the impact of project involvement on the lives of participating children as part of evaluation procedures.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Humanitarian Accountability**

Christine Lipohar, Regional Child Protection Advisor for Save the Children (UK) in Southern Africa, reflects on issues of humanitarian accountability raised by recent events in West Africa.

The issue of humanitarian accountability received worldwide attention in early 2002 when a joint Save the Children (UK)/UNHCR study of displaced and refugee populations in West Africa reported extensive sexual exploitation of women and adolescent girls by humanitarian aid workers, peacekeepers and community members in positions of influence and power including chiefs, teachers and religious leaders. The study found that sex was exchanged for money, gifts, protection, registration cards, food, shelter, labour, school grades, school uniforms and supplies. Adolescent boys were economically exploited (labour services) in exchange for the same things as girls and to a lesser degree sexually exploited by influential women in the community.

Responses to the report were fairly rapid at all levels. Codes of conduct were developed or strengthened, staff training in child protection, abuse and exploitation was accelerated and inter-agency working groups were formed specifically to address the issues. In the Southern Africa region, WFP, SC (UK) and UNICEF implemented a regional training programme around prevention of sexual exploitation geared towards humanitarian aid workers involved with food-aid programmes. About 4,000 participants across the region participated in this programme and most countries are continuing it on a smaller scale.

In Zimbabwe, individual NGOs have been training their staff on humanitarian accountability and this has helped reduce incidences of abuse. However, in developing accountability systems to protect beneficiaries, it is important to take into consideration existing power dynamics. Where endemic attitudes and perceptions towards women and children give them considerably diminished status and position in the society, there will be a high prevalence of abuse and exploitation. This 'norm' is worsened during crisis, and often manifests itself in an increase in domestic violence and forces adolescent girls especially into survival mechanisms that are exploitative in nature, including transactional sex.

The introduction of humanitarian assistance into this equation further widens the gap as those with influence, power and status (often male/educated/ articulate) are given positions that enable them to either control life-saving humanitarian resources or give the impression that they are doing so. The West Africa study also showed that although agencies had good intentions to monitor, there was virtually nothing in place to systematically collect, analyse, and respond to what beneficiaries had to say in terms of their access to humanitarian assistance. Nor was a common set of guidelines or benchmarks being used, against which accountability could be monitored.

'There have been no reports' was a frequent response of senior level agency staff when asked about the existence of sexual exploitation. The study clearly showed that unless monitoring systems proactively, safely, confidentially and appropriately seek the views and impressions of those with comparatively little influence, power or status in the community, usually the most vulnerable, reports of abuse, exploitation or other inappropriate conduct or distribution of resources are unlikely to emerge. In the same vein, where they do exist, 'reporting' mechanisms often fail the survivors of abuse because the very people who are perpetrating the abuse are often the ones to whom the reports are to be given. Independent and regular monitoring and evaluation of the monitoring, reporting and

documentation systems will identify these shortcomings and are therefore critical components of an effective accountability system.

Linked to all of the above, one of the most crucial findings that emerged was the remarkable lack of knowledge by beneficiaries, particularly children and women, about the humanitarian assistance process, and their rights to it. This lack of knowledge directly contributed towards increasing their vulnerability to abuse and exploitation. Beneficiaries for example, actually believed that lodging a complaint against an agency worker could result in the withdrawal of assistance such as food aid from the community.

Efforts should be made to keep beneficiaries fully and regularly informed about the assistance programme through age and gender-sensitive approaches. Information needs to include the decision-making process that takes place to start and stop assistance, codes of conduct that are in place, accountability benchmarks that are being used, redress mechanisms, understanding why there are changes in rations, delayed distributions, and agencies understanding the impact of these. Because the most vulnerable are often the easiest to exploit, illiterate, lacking the skills and confidence to raise issues, and unable to attend information sessions because they are focusing on daily survival, special efforts need to be made to ensure that information reaches them through involving, talking and listening to them directly, not simply relying on information being 'passed on' by leaders. Sessions geared towards children, who usually comprise the majority of beneficiaries and are the most easily exploited, should be given high priority and should be facilitated through child friendly approaches. These should be interactive, supportive, age-sensitive and draw on children's own knowledge and perceptions.

## **Appendix 2**

### **Hearing Committee Recommendations**

The recommendations made by the Hearing Committee provided a wealth of approaches for improving food distribution activities. Such recommendations are not only important in the context of Child Feedback Committees, but can be used to enhance agency accountability to any beneficiary population targeted for emergency food assistance.

#### **Prejudice in distribution of food at home levels**

Based on reports of prejudice in the distribution of food aid at home levels, the Hearing Committee recommended that the Save the Children (UK) monitoring and evaluation team carry out household investigations in any section of Mutorashanga in which reported cases originated. The purpose of such investigations would be to obtain further information on the sharing of food at the household level and seek to expose any sharing that may be taking place with non-recipient family members.

Additional awareness meetings at Distribution Points were recommended to further emphasise issues such as:

- Everyone in the beneficiary household having an equal right to food
- Aid food should not be used as a form of payment for tasks completed by children
- Withholding food is not an appropriate punishment for children
- Children should be given first preference to food regardless of their position in the family (orphans and foster children have equal rights to accessing food)
- Encourage community (with a focus on children) to report cases of misuse of food rations at the home level. The importance of confidentiality and need to verify allegations of food misuse should also be communicated as part of encouraging reporting
- Reiterating the quantity of individual and family rations prior to each food distribution.

#### **Child Participation at Food Distributions Potentially Abusive**

Children revealed a number of problems associated with the common practice of children being sent to collect family rations from food distribution points.

The Hearing Committee recommended that SC (UK) undertake a survey at each DP, in which attending children would be interviewed to provide the organisation with a better understanding of the circumstances that force children to attend food distributions and the problems they face due to their attendance.

To address issues of individuals not designated as recipients collecting food for their family, the Hearing Committee further recommended that food registers include dis-aggregated information capturing the gender of the beneficiary and the name of the food recipient at distribution points. Traditionally, women carry food from distribution points. In some cases, children and other family members will be obligated to assist in the collection and transport of the food ration back to the

household level. In cases where a registered beneficiary does not attend the food distribution, the name and gender of the recipient should be formally noted.

The Hearing Committee also raised need for SC (UK) to investigate the possible need to support income-generating projects assisting community members with vehicles to provide transport to children/elderly/sick to transport food to their homes. Possibility for such an initiative to be undertaken through SC (UK)'s 'Livelihoods Programme'.

### **Impact of Food Aid in Mutorashanga Community**

The Hearing Committee determined that the negative impacts listed by children reveal the need of SC (UK) to continually assess whether food aid is the most appropriate intervention for a community. Part of this assessment included investigations into what preparedness can be put in place to ensure that food aid does not undermine community development by creating dependency or detrimentally affect local labour markets. The need for an exit strategy when ending food aid activities in Mutorashanga was suggested as an additional means of addressing the negative impacts reported by children.

The Hearing Committee also noted that the reported migration of ex-commercial farm workers raises issues related to the difficulty of targeting transient populations for food assistance. There is an increased need to be attentive to migration patterns of all food-aid programmes in Zimbabwe in the current socio-economic context, with the displacement of thousands of farmworkers through the land reform programme. It was consequently recommended that the quantity and distribution of displaced farmworkers in Mutorashanga be verified and explored in next Household Economy Assessment (HEA) in Mutorashanga.

### **Identification of children/families in need of food not included on distribution lists**

The Hearing Committee recommended that reports of families in need being left off distribution lists required clarification of the source of the problem. For example: Were families left off distribution lists due to inaccurate vulnerability assessments, where population in need is greater than that identified through such assessments? Or, is the problem due to non-deserving families being included through beneficiary registration exercises? SC (UK) team was recommended to intensify household verifications within the Mutorashanga community to verify the source of the complaints.

To help improve accuracy of future vulnerability assessments the Hearing Committee suggested that SC (UK) should create 'Vulnerability Calendar' that reflects vulnerability patterns and factors affecting vulnerability of beneficiary populations in SC (UK)'s areas of operation. Migration of farm workers identified as justification for such an exercise, where vulnerability would be highest during winter, when opportunities for labour are low. The absence of a vulnerability calendar was suggested as a potential reason for reports of vulnerable families being left off distribution lists, as at time of initial vulnerability assessment, those families may have not been experiencing food insecurity. A Vulnerability Calendar would consequently guide household verification visits, and help to determine required number of beneficiaries during different 'seasons' of food distribution.

### **Mismanagement of food rations post-distribution**

Children reported that the family ration package did not always reach the household level in its entirety following distributions.

SC (UK) monitoring team was recommended by the Hearing Committee to carry out ‘targeted’ random sampling as part of household verification activities. This would entail targeted visits to households reported to be misusing food rations. Such targeted household verification would be conducted at the same time as random visits to avoid the targeting of children in the household for reporting such activities. Any undeserving households would then be taken off registration lists.

Bartering of food for other essential household items was discussed by the Hearing Committee as being a potential function of the level of emergency within the community. HC members recommended that emergency food programmes should include monitoring mechanisms to determine the level of trade as an assessment for the need of a non-food intervention.

### **Misconceptions surrounding food aid process held among communities**

Community misconceptions surrounding the food aid process were recommended by the Hearing Committee to indicate a need for intensified community sensitization regarding the purposes and utility of protocols surrounding food distribution. Such false impressions indicate a lack of transparency surrounding the food-aid programme, and evidence the need for increased communication and awareness meetings within the community.

The Hearing Committee noted that the registration process is of particular importance during community awareness programming, where misconceptions can be prevented before food distribution activities begin, reducing the likelihood of the misuse of food aid.

### **Inappropriate staff conduct towards beneficiaries at distribution sights**

Children reported being verbally abused by a SC (UK) food aid team member at distribution points.

While the Hearing Committee agreed that relative to agency abuses identified in the IASC experience, the reports of abuse by SC (UK) staff were relatively innocuous, they still required action. It was agreed that the irritability of staff at DPs could be attributed to exhaustion and difficulties in controlling large, demanding crowds. The Hearing Committee suggested that conditions at each DP, which may contribute to heighten stress levels by staff and beneficiaries, be examined, and efforts that can be made to improve DP site conditions identified. For example, does each DP provide a shady area, access to water? Part of DP sight conditions was suggested to necessarily include an investigation of whether there is a need to split some DPs with a large number of beneficiaries, or insufficient areas of relief from environment, or space to wait.

### **Allegations of child abuse unrelated to food distribution**

The boundaries of intervention for the Hearing Committee to respond to allegations of abuse were limited. All cases were necessarily referred to Social Welfare, the Hearing Committee did recommend that SC (UK) create follow-up channels to review the outcome of each reported case. The Hearing Committee also recommended that SC (UK) conduct an investigation into what safety nets were in place in the Mutorashanga community for children who had been identified as being abused.

## References And Further Reading

- 1) *Humanitarian Exchange*, no. 24, July 2003, has a special feature on accountability, including an article covering the West African sex scandal.
- 2) 'Feedback Channel: A Save the Children (UK) Strategy for Channelling Complaints and Suggestions Related to Food Aid Operations in Zimbabwe', internal document, Harare: SC (UK) July 2003.
- 3) 'Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises in Southern Africa, WFP, UNICEF, SC (UK) Regional Training Report', Pretoria, May 2003.
- 4) 'Report of the IASC Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises', 13 June 2002. <[www.unicef.org/emerg/IASCTFReport.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/IASCTFReport.pdf).>