ADAPTIVE PEACEBUILDING PROGRAMMING THROUGH EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK LOOPS: PROMISING PRACTICES

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The Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium (PEC)

The Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium (PEC) is a project of Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) in partnership with CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, Mercy Corps and Search for Common Ground (SFCG). The project is funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) and is field-wide effort to address the unique challenges to measuring and learning from peacebuilding programs. The PEC convenes donors, scholars, policymakers, local and international practitioners, and evaluation experts in an unprecedented open dialogue, exchange, and joint learning. It seeks to address the root causes of weak evaluation practices and disincentives for better learning by fostering field-wide change through three strategic and reinforcing initiatives: 1) Developing Methodological Rigor; 2) Improving the Culture of Evaluation and Shared Learning; and 3) Fostering the Use of Evidence to Inform Peacebuilding Policy.

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects

CDA (www.cdacollaborative.org) is a US based non-profit organization committed to improving the effectiveness of those who work internationally to provide humanitarian assistance, engage in peace practice, support sustainable development, and conduct corporate operations in a socially responsible manner. CDA helps peace practitioners and organizations improve the relevance and accountability of programming through better tools for conflict analysis, program strategy, design, and monitoring and evaluation. In the evaluation sphere, CDA has contributed to influential policy guidance, such as the OECD/DAC guidance on evaluating conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities.

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Introduction

This case study report was developed by CDA s part of Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium collaborative research on the use of feedback loops in support of adaptive programming. Feedback loops are just one element of adaptive programming and are defined and used in different ways by organizations working on social change, peace and development issues. In a recently published Bond learning paper written by CDA, we outline why feedback is vital to adaptive management:

> "Ultimately, we want to know that our presence, engagement, processes and services are relevant and capable of supporting positive and lasting development outcomes. These outcomes are shaped by dynamic contexts and often complex situations. They are also impacted by periodic shifts in donor and organisational priorities, capacities and commitments. With adaptive management approaches[1] and Doing Development Differently[2] commitments gaining ground, feedback needs to be recognized and elevated as a complementary source of data for quality improvement and course correction.
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> Aid agencies routinely receive solicited and unsolicited beneficiary feedback. Some of this information is intentionally sought (e.g. during assessments, consultations and community input sessions), some is submitted through established and formal complaints and feedback channels (e.g. hotlines, suggestion boxes, community meetings) and other feedback is received informally during day-to-day contact with beneficiaries. Some of this information is factual and can be triangulated and verified. The rest is perceptions, opinions, perspectives, suggestions or anonymous complaints that are harder to verify. Operational organisations understand that perceptions data can greatly improve assessments of how well we are doing and what else is happening in the context which our indicators can miss."[3]

The focus of our PEC collaborative research was informed by several challenges and opportunities identified by the Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium in 2015-2016 period related to monitoring and evaluation practice in the peacebuilding field. Among these challenges and opportunities there were several that were directly relevant to CDA's on-going work on evaluative practices and feedback loops:

- Evaluation systems are rigid and do not give space for good monitoring and adapting
- Evaluation is usually a short-term effort due to the lack of resources and short deadlines
- The lack of emphasis on local voice and needs
- Frank consideration of failures enable learning

CDA's collaborative research on effective feedback mechanisms started in 2011 and has engaged a range of humanitarian and development organizations including World Vision's humanitarian and development departments, IOM, IFRC, IRC, NRC, and members of UK-based Bond network. In the peacebuilding sector, over the years, we have observed a growing interest in participatory approaches for engaging program participants and other stakeholders in programmatic reviews, reflection exercises and evaluative processes, but few such practices were documented or described in detail. We expanded our feedback loops research in 2016 to include key informant interviews with peace practitioners to better define the concept of effective feedback loops specifically in peacebuilding programming and to

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[1] See recent Bond paper "Adaptive Management: What It Means for CSOs" https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/adaptive-management-what-it-means-for-csos

[2] Doing Development Differently Manifesto http://doingdevelopmentdifferently.com/

[3] Jean, I. (2017) Beneficiary Feedback: how we hinder and enable good practice. London: Bond.

identify and describe different types of feedback mechanisms that are being used by a range of peacebuilding organizations. In 2017, we also had an opportunity to collaborate with Search for Common Ground to document lessons about use of feedback in their Burundi programs.

This document includes key findings from our desk review of reports and grey literature, key informant interviews, observations documented during CDA's advisory and learning engagements with peacebuilding partners as well as case study on SFCG's feedback processes in Burundi. The findings are most relevant to program and M&E staff but have implications for senior management and policymakers in light of growing interest in strengthening adaptive management.

Why Feedback Loops and Adaptive Peacebuilding Programming?

Across the international development and peacebuilding sectors, there is a growing interest in evaluative thinking and feedback loops and an increasing commitment to engaging frontline staff, local partners, community members and program participants as "users" of data, information and lessons. Peacebuilders have long described themselves as "reflective practitioners" who strive for inclusive and participatory processes. These principle-based commitments to ensure participation, inclusive governance, and accountability to the local populations must be accompanied by skillfully facilitated elicitive processes, rapid feedback and learning cycles and by adaptive action. Without these, there are fewer opportunities for individuals and groups affected by agencies' programs or actions to influence how peacebuilding programs are designed, managed and evaluated.

Adaptive programming hinges on many elements: institutional commitment to use different forms of data in decision-making, ability to course correct and adapt programming in response to changes in context and participant needs, as well as staff capacity to think in critical way about what we do, observe and learn during design and implementation of programs. Listening broadly and intentionally, and soliciting local analysis and feedback are all critical requirements for organizations supporting local peacebuilding efforts. An effective feedback process goes beyond collecting participant satisfaction data using pre-determined questions. Well-designed and context-appropriate feedback processes provide an opportunity to regularly engage program constituents in evaluative conversations about the assumptions that underpin interventions, to question the validity of these assumptions and programmatic choices and to offer suggestions for program quality improvement during implementation and evaluation phases.

CDA's ongoing research on effective feedback loops and factors that enable feedback utilization[4] has already produced case studies and evidence-based practical guidance to assist donors and operational agencies in the humanitarian and development fields. As a result, an increasing number of humanitarian and development agencies are conducting assessments and feedback processes informed by CDA's lessons and guidance. Together with our learning partners, we have identified practices, gaps and opportunities that apply equally to the peacebuilding field, due to patterns in organizational behavior:

- Frequently missed opportunities for engaging local people, not only through listening to their perspectives, but also by engaging them in analysis of feedback and identification of necessary program changes.
- Staff and local partners often need enhanced skills in active listening, appreciative inquiry, and facilitation of participatory data analysis.

[4] See publications from our collaborative learning project on "Effectively Utilizing Feedback" http://cdacollaborative.org/cdaproject/effectively-utilizing-feedback/

- Skills and processes are not enough; institutional structures, decision making that incorporates feedback, management support and incentives are necessary.
- Increased use of technology can support sustained and real-time feedback loops, often as one element of an M&E system. But technology does not address literacy levels, culturally appropriate monitoring/ feedback processes, language, and who is engaged and who is left out (by gender, age, elites vs. marginal/vulnerable status, etc.)

There are many opportunities to improve feedback loops with participants and partners. For example, regular use of conflict and context analysis often triggers additional data collection and updates to the program design. *Context monitoring* is linked to gathering additional data on the link between conflict analysis and the choice of the programmatic intervention (i.e. program relevance and appropriateness of programming). Similarly, *program monitoring* has become a staple in many large peacebuilding organizations who are required to track progress towards milestones and intended results. As part of this practice, M&E and program staff use different forms of data collection to gather input on the quality of programming, its relevance and appropriateness and seek suggestions for improvements.

For peacebuilding programs, feedback loops broadly serve two main purposes: **program quality improvement** and **participatory context monitoring**.

Program quality improvement: Solicited and unsolicited feedback can be gathered to inform real-time program improvements and adaptation. Fedback is sought on the quality and appropriateness of program interventions, staff performance and program results. Feedback is gathered as part of routine monitoring processes or by establishing additional, accessible and confidential feedback channels. Such practices have become commonplace in many humanitarian operations, particularly the use of complaints response and grievance mechanisms.[5] Challenges remain in active conflict areas where restricted access and security concerns prohibit regular communication channels. In addition to feedback on program quality, local views can be sought on broader, strategic areas to inform strategy review for programs, sectors or country specific policies. Both program-level and strategy-level feedback loops require an intentional and purposeful approach to feedback collection, acknowledgement, analysis and making sense of data, opinions and perceptions.

Participatory context monitoring. Organizations seeking to identify unintended and unanticipated effects of their programs need to establish feedback channels and practices that reach beyond their target program participants. This is particularly true when over-reliance on indicator-based methodologies can result in oversight of dynamic changes in the context and a program's effects on the local context. Well-functioning feedback mechanisms can capture and respond to real-time information about unintended impacts of programs on inter-group and intra-group relations and avoid doing harm. A functioning feedback loop goes beyond feedback collection and analysis. It requires a response and/or corrective action, in other words -- the closing of the loop.[6] Ultimately, for feedback loops to be effective, the feedback needs to be utilized in decision-making and evaluative processes.[7]

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[5] See CDA 2011b.
[6] See Bonino, F. with Jean, I. and Knox-Clarke, P. 2014 and 2014b.
[7] See more Ernstorfer, Anita, Isabella Jean, and Peter Woodrow, with Diana Chigas. *Thinking Evaluatively in Peacebuilding Design, Implementation and Monitoring: Three Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) and Do No Harm (DNH)-infused options to strengthen the effectiveness of peacebuilding strategies and programs*. Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium, 2016.

Summary of Findings

Because many peacebuilding organizations associate feedback with M&E processes during implementation and evaluation with institutional learning and broader accountability. It was not altogether surprising that formal feedback was often interpreted as tracking and learning about project progress and internal accountability but not often as part of informing broader strategic planning and learning processes.

For peace practitioners who regularly engage in conflict analysis, analysis of power dynamics between the community and the organisation are an important element of feedback loops and real-time context monitoring. Senior management representatives in several organizations, in particular, noted that as the legitimacy of their organizations can be questioned during violent outbreaks their staff need to be aware that perceptions matter and that they do have certain power which needs to be exercises responsibly.

Peacebuilding organizations do more to engage project participants during project conception phase than their humanitarian counterparts, and this is especially true for organizations who have been working in the area for a long time and has a trusted network of partners.

Organizations that have strong M&E processes and invests in building the analytical capacity of its staff also reported stronger decision making and sense-checking processes embedded in their project design and implementation processes.

All organizations we engaged with stated a recognition that more time and space was needed for real-time and regular feedback loops and engagement of program participants during implementation. At the same time, most also acknowledge that it is not easy to make changes in response to feedback. This relates to inflexible project approval and implementation approach, and the multiple efforts required to persuade donors that course corrections are necessary. As documented recently by the Alliance for Peacebuilding, adaptive management requires a number of internal and external commitments to use data for agile decision-making.[8]

Finally, participant and partner feedback are too often found on the periphery of organisational and program quality reviews and plans. Even in cases where senior leadership has modeled direct engagement in solicitation and review of feedback as demonstrated in case studies below, staff still reported no explicit incentives for other members of senior management team to engage with feedback.

Formal feedback that was solicited with surveys, questionnaires and as part of M&E processes is typically better documented, analyzed and used in decision making. Conversely, across all organizations we interviewed, we heard that feedback that was collected informally is more likely to be undocumented and often lost during staff turnover or busy implementation process.

The sections below provide useful illustrations in a form of brief case studies from select organizations that participated in our collaborative research process.

[8] Alliance for Peacebuilding (2018). Snapshot of Adaptive Management in Peacebuilding Programming: What are the key challenges and recommendations for implementing adaptive management in peacebuilding programs? Washington, DC: Alliance for Peacebuilding.

Feedback Loops at Mercy Corps: Cross-sectoral approach

Mercy Corps (MC) is a large multi-mandate INGO which works on long-term development, governance, peacebuilding, and humanitarian sectors. Feedback practices differ across the organization's sectoral departments and country offices and reflect the range of feedback practices by other humanitarian organizations in emergency settings vs. in stable and long-term development contexts.

Mercy Corps peacebuilding staff described a range of feedback collection and utilization practices which include both sensitive and non-sensitive feedback. There is a growing recognition that to respond to sensitive complaints, especially related to sexual and exploitation and abuse (SEA), MC country teams need to establish explicit channels for submitting complaints and a formal protocol in place for responding to them. These are more prevalent in emergency settings and where MC is engaged in large scale emergency response.

From a program implementation standpoint, Mercy Corps intends to introduce mechanisms in place that would complement existing monitoring processes and gather participant feedback on the quality and relevance of programming. MC has experience with community accountability reporting mechanisms in several country offices and lessons from these have been shared internally. For Mercy Corps, a focus on community accountability, transparency and responsiveness, goes hand in hand with the principled and programmatic focus on good governance. MC's good governance programs which focus on citizens in fragile and conflict affected states who lack access to basic information about their rights and responsibilities have an attendant focus on ineffective accountability and transparency mechanisms which can exacerbate grievances, encourage corruption and foster disengagement and distrust in decision-making processes.[9] This push to improve social accountability is also reflected in increased attention being paid to program accountability to local stakeholders and participants.

In 2010, MC established the program management minimum standards and has since integrated these into all project management processes as well as into on-boarding process for new staff. New project staff are required to be fully familiar with the standards and expectations of what quality programming looks like. The set of expectations and standards cover a range of areas including participatory approaches, participant and stakeholder engagement and feedback. A recent evaluation reviewed this internal program management process, but findings were not yet available at the time of this interview.

Since 2014, there has been a stronger internal push at MC to strengthen accountability and reporting mechanisms and there are now internal guidelines and range of tools available on both SEA-related and non-sensitive feedback practices. The position of Director of Performance and Program Quality creates an important link between the two equally important purposes for ongoing participant feedback collection: program accountability and program quality improvements. Staff reporting to this position reflected on the ongoing efforts to extend MC's experience with community accountability in development and humanitarian programming to the current conflict and peacebuilding focused programming which has fewer formal mechanisms in place.

However, Mercy Corps M&E staff continue to see areas for improvement in how community or participant feedback fits under existing M&E processes and ways that feedback utilization can be improved alongside use of monitoring data in decision-making. Like many other organizations that CDA has accompanied in the process of improving feedback loops, MC described a disconnect between M&E

[9] Mercy Corps, Good Governance Approach https://www.mercycorps.org/research/good-governance

and program management staff who often handle community feedback in potentially complementary but not always well-integrated ways.[10] Feedback is often collected informally and used by program staff without formal processing, tracking and reporting, making some of the feedback loops invisible to senior management, M&E staff or colleagues at the headquarters. A recent mid-term evaluation of Mercy Corps program in the Central African Republic documented a range of data collection processes that inform program implementation and course corrections ranging from M&E data, with FGDs and key informant interviews to beneficiary surveys which were also complemented by informal feedback gathered by project staff.

Beyond program accountability and quality focus, Mercy Corps has been actively experimenting with adaptive management[11] using different forms of data in its ADAPT (Analysis Driven Agile Programming Techniques) initiative led by MC and the International Rescue Committee (IRC). As part of ADAPT, MC and IRC are tracking context adaptability and course corrections in program design and operational decisions alongside outcome measures.[12]

The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC): Feedback Loops in a Partnership Model

The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) works in 54 countries and has a total budget of $94 million of which around $11 million is dedicated to peacebuilding. MCC works through a partner accompaniment model and has 528 active partners worldwide including local organizations, churches and networks. Across the globe, MCC's partnerships cover a range of engagements in humanitarian, peacebuilding and long-term development work. MCC has three modes of engagement with partners: grants, provision of material resources and secondment of MCC staff and volunteers from the US and Canada. There is also a young adult program that facilitates South-South exchange.

Local feedback as part of reporting

All of the internationally supported programs have been using MCC's M&E system since 2007 and MCC now expects US-based and Canada-based programs to use the same system although there are some M&E capacity gaps in N. American programs. The information generated through feedback mechanisms currently used in different countries is rarely elevated MCC Global Team and is used largely at the local level. MCC developed a simple English translation for reporting templates which helped to make translation simpler since most of the partners are at grassroots level. The information that reaches MCC Global is presented in partner reports on progress and adjustments made and lessons learned summaries. Summaries of direct feedback from program participants is currently not required in progress report thus making local participant feedback less visible to MCC global. In addition, there was some resistance to setting up formal feedback mechanisms in a few country offices and local partners in MENA region as staff and local partners questioned why they should change the current way of engaging with local communities and participants and didn't see a clear purpose for additional or formal mechanisms.

There is a global reporting mechanism for all partners. Project design and project reporting templates, required twice a year, there are embedded questions: how are participants engaged in conceptualization and design of projects? In progress reports and final reports, what feedback from

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[10] For more in the challenges with institutional set-ups for feedback management, see CDA's blog "Where Should the Feedback Function Sit? Determining the Institutional Location for the feedback function," December 2016.
[11] Mercy Corps (2015), Managing Complexity: Adaptive Management at Mercy Corps. Report.
[12] International Rescue Committee and Mercy Corps Report (2017). "Adapting Aid: Lessons from Six Case Studies."

participants has been gathered and utilized for program adaptation? MCC Global staff feel that over the years they have managed to strike a reasonable balance between amount of information required for accountability purposes and for internal reflection, learning and improvements. Often these different purposes require different forms of information and a different approach to managing expectations and relationships with partners. MCC Global team seeks to find balance between its commitment to accountability and participatory processes and the need for feedback process to be facilitated and driven by local partners.

Feedback as part of evaluation

MCC doesn't usually commission external evaluators, except for larger food security programs funded by the Canadian government. Every country program undergoes a program review every five years led by MCC and an external consultant, peer reviewers and a local expert. The review includes a two-week site visit and extensive interviews. The review doesn't focus at specific project level and instead assesses the overall programmatic portfolio of MCC operations and relationships with partners and participants, albeit with lesser focus on the latter.

Feedback as part of project implementation process

Informally, feedback from partners and staff is collected during project site visits with all site visit data entered into a global database. The databased has a field called "MCC comments" and staff are asked to log important observations, concerns and comments there. Area Directors conduct an annual trip to project sites and use their trip reports to capture observations and immediate feedback received during the trip as well.

In Nigeria, one of MCC's partners established a feedback mechanism, partially funded by MCC, that included both context and program monitoring elements. For context monitoring and rapid information sharing, MCC partners also use the Emergency Preparedness and Response Network (EPR) in Nigeria where partners and local community members use cell phones to alert others of escalations and threats. Programming is adapted based on real-time context information and feedback from local partners.

Partner feedback

Partner feedback is gathered by MCC through reports and regular conversations with partners. In addition, MCC participated in Keystone Accountability administered partner survey in 2010 (part of the first cohort) and repeated the survey in 2013. This partner survey is managed independently by Keystone Accountability as a service for a range of INGOs. The results were very positive, and most partners 'evaluated MCC very highly" with MCC placing as one of the top three organizations ranked by partners on Keystone survey. Subsequent engagement with Keystone partner survey had smaller response rate because MCC partners didn't see the need further need for anonymous feedback or intermediary-facilitated process. They felt that they have already given same feedback directly to MCC and felt confident that they have an open feedback channel directly with MCC.

MCC's established process for "partner exchanges" during which MCC and partner organizations gather and exchange lessons and good practices with each other is an additional and important feedback platform. Current work in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea is illustrative of MCC's commitment to fund partner exchanges between Ukrainian and Bosnian partners to support their learning and extend the feedback and reflection process for the benefit of partners who are in a process of long-term planning of what MCC's support will look like in the region (e.g. Bosnia).

Institutional locus for feedback loops

At MCC Global, both sectoral and supervisory lines of management are involved in reviewing feedback with area directors and those that they report to them seeing most of the feedback. Among the technical/sectoral coordinators (education, peacebuilding, health, food security, humanitarian relief, material resources) see relevant feedback when it is reported through progress reports or escalated to MCC Global for action.

At MCC Global, internal information-sharing, and data management system is facilitated through a global database and a browser that compiles reports, monitoring and feedback from country offices. Global database is currently restricted by MCC staff with management portions of area director reports restricted to certain staff (budgets, HR, etc) and partners don't have access to it. Global data set and monitoring data is used for donor relations and external reporting as well: MCC Global develops "project discovery" and storyboards for an annual Christmas giving drive to outreach to private donors.

Bosnia and Serbia MCC Program

> "*Feedback is part and parcel of the process with partners and difficult to isolate as a specifically designated mechanism. It is the way we operate here, and generally the way MCC operates and engages with partners: MCC serves as an advisor with partners, and our partners work directly with participants. We select our partners carefully and support them in all aspects, so they can ensure an ethical, participatory and accountable process with local communities. Our partnerships are built on a basic understanding: they are experts in their own contexts. If our partners come to us with feedback, however large or small, we are ready to listen. They work with program participants to identify priority needs and appropriate program that are informed by a shared local vision*." MCC senior staff covering Serbia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Ukraine

MCC regional staff regularly communicate with partners monthly by phone, Skype, and in-person during field visits that happen at least once a year (for remotely based partners). MCC staff solicit feedback in an open-ended way but do not push for formal mechanisms. This applies to input and feedback on overall Theories of Change and regional strategies. According to staff, some of the documented local feedback is shared by partners in progress reports twice a year: "If the partners are ready to be open and vulnerable, they include critical feedback in progress reports as well, but most reports focus on positive examples.

The progress report includes a section on "Key changes and project adjustments" in which most such examples are detailed, including programmatic changes made in response to participant feedback, changes in the context, resistance and political climate." In this regional office, there have not been instances of sensitive feedback or complaints related to misconduct and other violations. MCC regional staff felt that local participants would not be reporting such to MCC directly but would bring these directly to partners. In addition, staff felt that "If MCC were to require a 'by-passing channel,' this would call into question our trust in partners' ability to handle such situations.

MCC Global team has also sought feedback from local partners in the Balkans on broader questions to inform strategic direction of MCC in the region. HQ team gathered input by engaging partners in deeper conversations about the continued role of MCC in the region, long-term impacts and strategic planning. According to regional staff, a summary of these conversations was shared with senior leadership and "these fairly involved feedback conversations with partners" were also seen as useful at a local level as a pause for reflection.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), MCC partners seek local input and feedback as part of project design by "keeping ears to the ground" and listening to what is working and what doesn't. For example, a peacebuilding education program in BiH focused on professional development for teachers, includes courses for teachers on non-violent communication and joint pilgrimage to religious sites for teachers of different religious backgrounds. Despite of successful implementation elsewhere in BiH, the government in the Respublika Srpska made it difficult for MCC partners to work with teachers in local schools due to higher level of centralization and state control. MCC partners had to adjust their approach and engage teachers in different ways and sought feedback on several design and implementation aspects.

The above referenced project is three-year long, and there is uncertainty about what the socio-political context will look like after upcoming elections. MCC Global has asked its partners to be honest and accountable about the necessary changes and adaptations and to be responsive to the needs and concerns of local participants, without fearing that MCC Global may not approve change to the original project design. According to regional staff, they signaled to partners: "We need to understand your reality and so that you are able to work with as much integrity as possible."

In Kosovo, the partners were focusing on young adults working and learning together. Based on participant feedback, which can be summarized as "you should be working with teachers too, you will be able to affect a bigger change in community if you do," MCC partners are now integrating peace education curriculum into teacher training and national curriculum.

International Alert: Feedback Loops in an M&E Process

At International Alert (IA), which is headquartered in London and works in 20+ countries and territories, feedback loops are embedded in ongoing M&E data collection and reporting processes and are not explicitly referenced as feedback mechanisms or feedback loops. Participant input or feedback is not typically part of project design but some regional teams (e.g. Eurasia team) at IA have had a longstanding process of engaging local partners and some participants in shaping the project design.

IA's M&E system has gone through recent adjustments in response to internal requests for data and results tracking as well as external requirements. Even without an explicit focus on feedback mechanisms and adaptive management, staff reflected on the fact that due to organizational culture, more than any other factor, "we are flexible and adaptive in our programming. At a first glance, there may be an impression that International Alert was not adapting because we didn't have a formal process for documenting certain data, feedback and resulting adaptations. But many of our proposals are intentionally kept open for flexibility. In addition, we maintain a strong relationship with our donors who allow for necessary changes and adaptations. Upon reflection, this was a reassuring realization for us."

There are no formal mechanisms for participant or partner feedback collection and no "top- down guidance" from HQ to country teams. Country teams are not required to establish and maintain formal feedback loops in place. M&E team member at HQ described a typical process:

> *"When we implement activities, our staff tend to ask for feedback, more than other information that is useful for M&E! Learning questions are there all the time, and in fact monitoring data is regularly reviewed for feedback and insights useful for institutional learning and quality of our activities, rather than pre-set formal indicators and accountability data. When our staff say 'M&E', they often think of formal accountability and there is a lot of pushback. But our country teams 'do M&E' without knowing and they are very good at it. If you don't say it is M&E and just ask for information, they have very rich information to share, including honest and real-time feedback from program participants and local partners on relevance and quality of our programming. Because we are decentralized organization, and because we value the expertise and initiatives of our country staff, we support our staff in keeping their ears to the ground when they implement activities. At the same time, we are guarding against M&E being perceived as*

> *only for external reporting and are trying to demonstrate how the data is useful for our internal program improvement and learning."*

The decentralized nature of programming is not uncommon and other organizations have also raised questions about balancing reporting requirements from country teams with the need for institutional learning and documentation of important lessons from adaptive programming. At IA, according to M&E staff sitting at HQ, this is a real concern: "We don't have all the information here in London. Every time we request information from country-based program managers, we are imposing new requests on very busy people. At the same time, if we don't have necessary information at HQ, we can't make the best decisions." The counterbalance to reporting and formal documentation is ensuring regular face to face interactions with program staff and key stakeholders. IA staff felt that a better knowledge management system could support better documentation and retrieval of illustrative example and lessons for use in future project design but currently project management database has limited functionality. There is interest in using it more for documenting ongoing learning and reflection, not just implementation level project details as IA looks to crystalize both evidence and its institutional expertise (what's in people's heads) and wants to balance reporting with learning.

Feedback utilization

At project level, there is sufficient flexibility at IA to adjust programming based on partner or participant feedback as well as due to changes in the context. CDA has observed several such adaptations made by IA Caucasus project staff in our recent advisory engagement to provide facilitation and evaluative support to IA's South Caucasus youth peacebuilding project. First, due to restrictions placed on civil society organizations in South Ossetia, the project has entirely adapted the approach to engaging with South Ossetian representatives. In Georgia and Abkhazia, participant feedback is regularly collected using satisfaction surveys, focus group discussions and face-to-face feedback sessions at the end of each regional meeting where participants gather to engage with peers. CDA supported the mid-term evaluation of the project in May 2017 and documented additional participant feedback and constructive suggestions for improving the quality of country-based and regional seminars which have already informed the design for 2018 seminar scheduled to take place in Barcelona.

At the headquarters level, M&E staff are tasked with supporting regional teams, facilitating cross-learning between regional teams and strengthening organizational systems for results tracking and learning. There are about 5-6 staff members whose job description include both M&E and project development and they input into or review most of the proposals that are submitted for funding as well as project evaluations. IA instituted such "mixed job descriptions" to enable the process of learning "to take place naturally – at the same desk." These staff members are split by region and sub-region and are embedded in their respective regional teams but are also part of the broader M&E team and subscribe to the internal M&E distribution list, attend required M&E meetings, share lessons from different regions with the core M&E team, and work on common proposals ensuring the "cross-pollination" that was one of the purposes of having 'core M&E' and 'project M&E' staff.

At the senior leadership level, according to staff based at HQ, IA's "CEO is good at listening, asks good questions, regularly visits country programs and maintains an open and constructive attitude. She is inquisitive, a great role model, and is fantastic at connecting with partners and local participants. She has a reputation for taking necessary decisions swiftly but uses the information provided by project and M&E teams to inform her decisions." CDA's evidence from multiple case studies has shown that "leadership factor" cannot be overestimated in an effort to strengthen or build effective accountability and feedback practices and that staff look to senior management for both guidance and incentives to maintain good practice.[13]

In addition, the senior management team (SMT) has improved decision-making using "impact plans" and engaging with M&E team to respond to questions such as, "What information do you need to take key business decisions?" SMT at IA would like to ensure resources are provided in the most strategic way considering reduced funding and competitive environment. IA is developing a set of learning-focused questions set at the higher level of organization as part of a strategic reflection exercise. This was incentivized by the pressure of reduced funding.

Feedback as part of annual reporting and evaluations

Annual reporting templates include a results section which includes questions on evidence of intended and unintended changes (positive and negative) resulting from project activities. The section does not explicitly ask for participant feedback, but most project teams report summaries of local feedback, direct quotes from participants and references to documented evidence (externally published reports, articles, media coverage). Using DFID-funded Program Partnership Agreement (PPA) grant and other core funding, IA conducted additional evaluations and gathered more beneficiary feedback and partner feedback than usually included in progress reports. The evaluative approach was useful for programmatic and strategic reviews and complementary to the on-going monitoring processes and internal reporting.

Search for Common Ground: Feedback Loops in Burundi

> *Less than a decade after the end of the civil war, Burundi remains one of the world's poorest countries, still recovering from generations of ethnic conflict. The country's fragile peace is threatened by rising political violence, restrictions on the press and freedom of assembly, high levels of youth unemployment, frequent land disputes, and tensions generated by the repatriation of refugees. Since 1995, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) has supported the process of peace and reconciliation in Burundi, building the capacity of local stakeholders to address a wide range of conflict issues, including transitional justice, refugee reintegration, land conflict, sexual and gender-based violence, and youth manipulation. One of their most important resources is Studio Ijambo, which has transformed Burundi's media landscape by training journalists and producing informative, solution-oriented programs.*[14]

This brief case study was written to contribute to a growing evidence base on feedback loops and adaptive management in the peacebuilding sector. To complement CDA's desk review and key informant interviews with senior management at SFCG, we conducted a week-long field visit to SFCG's Burundi country office to better understand how feedback loops are understood at implementation level and how feedback is used to improve programming. This case study serves as a snapshot of practices and perspectives shared by SFCG colleagues and partners. It is not an evaluation of SFCG or its programs and does not document the entire range of monitoring and evaluative processes related to the use of feedback at SFCG.

The case study is informed by a document review, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation. In total, there were 14 interviews conducted with SFCG staff, participants and

[13] CDA Blog "Leadership Factor," December 2014.
[14] https://www.sfcg.org/burundi/

partners. We conducted 2 focus group discussions (with 12 participants in total). One conversation was held with youth participants of SFCG's youth leaders' program, while the other was held with youth participants not involved in the program. In total, we spoke to 26 individuals and reviewed 35 program documents (logical frameworks, evaluations, program reports, and tools used for baseline, monitoring, round tables/FGDs, case studies). Most people we interviewed were bilingual French-English speakers, however, interviewees were given the option to choose their preferred language. French was the language used for nearly all the interviews.[15]

There is potential bias related to our analysis of non-programmatic monitoring (e.g. conflict monitoring). Owing to lack of time and prevailing circumstances, there was no opportunity to speak to SFCG partners involved in producing Conflict Scans reports. Therefore, there may be pertinent information in relation to feedback gathered using this tool which has not been included in this case study. We also did not hear a lot of examples about negative feedback reported by participants, which could be due to a small sample of people interviewed.

Understanding and Defining Feedback Loops

Feedback can be provided prior to implementation, or even years after a project has been completed. While a handful of SFCG staff and partners described participant feedback as occurring at different phases in the project cycle, most SFCG staff and partners interpreted feedback as information that is solicited and gathered during project implementation process. Most defined feedback as directly resulting from program implementation – most often understood as "important information provided by community members and by local or national political leaders in response to SFCG activities". One staff member described feedback as an "*echo*" that results from project activities. The section on 'Purpose of Feedback' below touches on different reasons why feedback at the implementation stage was seen to be critically important.

SFCG staff and partners implicitly understood feedback as information gathered in both 'formal' and 'informal' ways. At the time of the visit, SFCG Burundi had several formal mechanisms in place for monitoring programs and collecting participant and stakeholder feedback, and formal feedback was seen as an integral part of the mechanisms already in place to monitor a program.

Formal Feedback

Language used to define feedback (implicitly 'formal,' or **solicited** feedback) included, in general, words like the participants' "reactions" to a project or the "results" gathered about a project or an activity. It was very clear, based on the interviews and review of program documents for this case study, that SFCG has a well-established M&E system in place to monitor, reflect and evaluate country programs. For example, the software provided by Frontline SMS[16] is often used for monitoring to track indicators. Project activity reports have a section for SFCG staff to include 'challenges and lessons learned' from an activity based on what they've observed during implementation. Similarly, post-training assessments include space for staff to elaborate on participant testimony and useful quotes ("useful," meaning if the quote showcases that training achieved its intended results). This type of "formal" feedback –

[15] It should be noted that the word "feedback" translates the same into French, so there was no issue with translation when asking interviewees to define what feedback means.

[16] https://www.frontlinesms.com/

information that staff or partners solicit and log into specific templates or activity reports was a common description of feedback practices during the interviews.

Many SFCG staff and partners reported that participant feedback helps them understand intended change and results better and enhances their learning. Feedback defined as ‘reactions’ or ‘results’ was often discussed in relation to learning if the project was on track according to its intended objectives. Only one local partner described feedback as something that was not learning-focused, but rather linked to formal ways their organization tracked internal communication, mainly for accountability purposes.

SFCG has formalized M&E processes by including them into project budgets, when possible. In addition, SFCG Burundi recently adjusted a project timeline and budget to allow longer periods of pre-project research and reflection with program participants. The intention is to improve the quality and relevance of project design (e.g. for programs to address the needs of different groups of community members). The process has already led to improvements as demonstrated by community feedback and consistent monitoring of resulting impacts. Several interviewees mentioned that SFCG designs programs based on local recommendations and findings from past program evaluations. SFCG project staff also collect feedback in less formal ways to track unexpected impacts or changes but it was more difficult to ascertain the level and volume of such feedback because it was not routinely documented.

Informal Feedback

Informal feedback was often described by staff and partners as “discussions” or “conversations” and “exchanges” held either between staff and participants, or staff and partners. There is no specific tool or template to capture such ongoing conversations, but one staff member mentioned that there is shared monitoring document which has been used for this purpose which was useful for later discussions with the M&E team. An M&E staff member described feedback loops as an “Evolutionary process - particularly in this region, [and often] it depends on programming. More lived feedback is happening than what people talk about”. The reference to “lived feedback” encompasses a range of informal feedback from opinions and perspectives about SFCG activities or staff behavior that comes up over dinner or as staff and participants are wrapping up to leave a project workshop.

During our interviews with participants and SFCG staff, people discussed the utility in finding simple ways to better capture informal feedback. Suggestions included having a short conversation at the beginning of the week during the regular Monday all-staff meeting to discuss unexpected, or informal feedback about the programs during “exchanges” or conversations between staff and local stakeholders.

Types of Unsolicited Feedback: Direct and Indirect Feedback

SFCG also receives unsolicited feedback which is documented well. ***Direct feedback submitted by project participants*** is common across SFCG programs but is seen as different from formally solicited feedback. Direct feedback describes the process by which feedback is provided (e.g., from radio listeners) rather than the process by which it is collected (e.g. by SFCG M&E staff asking participants for their opinions about certain activities). SFCG implements projects with an open space for ‘real time’ discussion of political, social and economic topics and despite significant political turbulence in the country in the summer 2015, the organization has managed to consistently maintain a neutral, and trusted status. This has created an opening for participants to provide rapid and direct feedback to SFCG and its media partners.

For example, feedback provided during radio shows is often unsolicited except for occasional prompts for listeners to 'call in and give us your opinion on this program'). Direct feedback is understood as calls by listeners about the radio presenters, radio show content, timing of shows, etc. SFCG has one tool to collect this type of feedback during radio emissions and is meant for media partners to record the content and nature of listener calls for each aired radio show. Some feedback is responded to immediately on air or at the next show's airing.

> *"[Feedback] lets us conceive new programs that are adapted to recommendations or needs of partners. For example, we had a 15-minute episode for youth, but they immediately told us this was too short and if we could record something on the topic that was longer so that there could be a debate following the episode. We did this!" – SFCG staff, Burundi, March 2017*

Indirect feedback was not mentioned much in relation to media programming, but several media partners mentioned "if you're not getting a response to your programming, that is feedback that you're not doing something right." As one person said, *"Journalists are not there to report about the trains running on time."*

Some interviewees and FGD participants mentioned confusion about the word "feedback." After further discussion, it became clear that the concept of feedback was not entirely misunderstood. Because SFCG has well-developed M&E tools and processes, feedback is not treated as an explicitly separate form of data collection and falls under the broader M&E processes which staff and program participants were very familiar with. During one FGD, it was recommended that SFCG staff provide a workshop for participants on feedback and its functions, with a clear distinction between formal and informal or unsolicited feedback. SFCG's Outcome Monitoring approach can prompt this conversation because it prompts staff and participants to agree on what outcomes were achieved, and then discuss different rationale for why the program was able to contribute, or not, to this outcome, using solicited feedback.

Feedback Collection Mechanisms at SFCG Burundi

Among the different types of programming at SFCG Burundi, a subset of activities includes workshops on joint conflict analysis, rumor management and mediation skills. In its media programming, SFCG and its partners produce radio programs on political, social and economic themes. Feedback mechanisms occasionally straddle both subsets of activities (e.g., SMS Frontline is used to collect data for workshops and radio shows, monitoring meetings held with different partners across all activities, and quarterly reports which encompass all areas). SFCG has also tailored some feedback mechanisms to specific types of activities. During our interviews and focus group discussions we heard about the following methods:

- **Frontline SMS & WhatsApp:** One of the most common ways SFCG collects feedback is via messaging applications, supported by Frontline SMS and WhatsApp.

- **"Restitutions":** Workshops and training sessions provide an opportunity to validate reports, research or other analyses (e.g., the Conflict Scans) that have been carried out by project or M&E teams and require an external review to assess gaps, quality of analysis and accuracy of data. These activities are called "restitutions" and are often implemented with small group of participants. Restitutions happen so frequently that participants now expected to take part in one whenever there's been a significant study done, or report written.

- **Email***:* Both SFCG staff and partners mentioned that emails, and regular modes of daily communication are used to share feedback. Internally, some saw email as a quick and efficient way to raise a concern with senior management at SFCG, when there was no time to discuss an issue in person. Ohers mentioned that email was a way to keep a record of conversations held in-person, so all parties could be held accountable for actions steps and follow-up.

- **Monday Morning Meeting:** SFCG team holds a regular meeting on Mondays. The meeting covers program and operational issues, ranging from project, admin and security updates, with notes circulated afterwards. The meetings provide an opportunity to share received feedback, but it is not a standing agenda item to discuss participant, partner or staff feedback.

- **Activity Reports:** Project activity reports are required but interviewees felt that these are rarely analyzed as a source of feedback. There is no designated section for relaying feedback received and the M&E team infrequently reviews these reports because it is seen as time-consuming, and previous analyses were not utilized in any significant way.

- **Quarterly reports** are written by project staff and present an opportunity for discussion of relevant feedback between project staff and upper management who review all quarterly reports. These are also discussed during regular monitoring meetings with partners.

- **Outcome Monitoring:** This is a recent monitoring approach instituted by SFCG Burundi and is still being developed by the M&E team, with input from project staff.

- **Social Media:** SFCG Burundi team monitors its social media channels, including Facebook for any relevant feedback or complaints about its programming.

- **Calls from listeners:** As mentioned earlier, radio presenters ask at the end of shows: "What did you think about this program? Call us at this number!"

Valuing and Using Feedback

CDA's research on feedback loops[17] pointed to imbalance of attention paid to feedback collection mechanisms while feedback data analysis and utilization were deprioritized. At SFCG Burundi, the M&E team holds the primary analytic responsibility for most formal feedback (e.g., monitoring data, or activity reports). However, SFCG program staff were primarily responsible for gathering and analyzing feedback from local authorities, which was one of the most important pieces of feedback SFCG staff received about the program's relationship to the context and its ability to operate in specific areas. Senior managers at SFCG's Burundi takes feedback seriously as was reported by many interviewees.

As described above, formally and informally gathered feedback is often handled separately by M&E and program team. Also, when M&E budgets differ by donor and project, at times SFCG project staff play a greater role in the M&E of its own project activities. There are also intentional efforts at cross-learning, with SFCG program staff occasionally asked to attend M&E workshops to improve their capacity in data analysis, including qualitative data.

[17] ALNAP-CDA Practitioner Guidance on Effective Humanitarian Feedback Mechanisms (2014). http://cdacollaborative.org/publication/closing-the-loop-effective-feedback-in-humanitarian-contexts-practitioner-guidance/

Several interviewees mentioned that SFCG project staff are often welcome to sit in on M&E meetings when the M&E team analyzes data and feedback. One staff member described the collaboration between SFCG project and M&E staff as a requirement in his job description. SFCG staff can make suggestions to amend project budgets based on feedback they receive, although these changes are often quite small to avoid triggering major changes in activities (which would have to trigger donor review, and approval). Budgets are reviewed monthly by program management, so there are multiple opportunities for staff to make budget change requests. Additionally, staff described the following ways they engage with feedback:

M&E staff. Activity monitoring is frequent and aligns with specific indicators and milestones that SFCG reports against. M&E team frequently uses SMS Frontline to collect baseline and on-going data. Project evaluations frequently use mixed methods, qualitative and quantitative, to gather data and feedback from participants, partners and other actors in communities within the areas of programming. The SFCG M&E staff who cover the entire region, alongside the Country Director, are the primary group that reviews baseline and monitoring data. The M&E team also conduct internal evaluations when possible, depending on time, need and available resources.

SFCG Project Staff. When there are issues with local or national political figures in project areas, SFCG staff are often the ones best placed to analyze the nature of the information or feedback given by local authorities and community leaders and to respond and to adjust operational or program aspects as needed. There are inevitable power dynamics at play in these micro-negotiations (e.g., if a local authority won't let a training take place because the proper approval process was not followed). In these cases, SFCG's Country Director often steps in to handle the issue. Because SFCG is a well-known organization in many areas of Burundi, the involvement of the Country Director by phone or in-person meeting is often necessary to persuade the relevant authorities that an activity is non-threatening (i.e., at risk of inciting opposition violence) and vital for the local communities that SFCG is working with.

Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Among the challenges described during interviews with staff, staff raised questions about the level of transparency in communication and feedback processes. Specifically, situations in which too much transparency can hurt relationships (e.g. telling all participants you're doing a training in one location, they will think you're abandoning the other locations). Others noted that "you can't always say what feedback prompted you to change a regular speaker in a radio show because it would offend that speaker."

Staff understand the value of negative feedback. One person noted that "no feedback is bad feedback" but staff also acknowledged that it is difficult to respond to and that there are cases where "Negative feedback is usually from people that want you on their (political) side." One of the gaps noted by staff was effective feedback mechanisms to collect unsolicited feedback (opinions, perspectives and suggestions that are shared directly by participants, without survey or solicitation). Others notes that a designated "feedback summary section" in an activity report (existing template) would encourage sharing unsolicited feedback and general observations from partners about program and context.

One staff member suggested the Facebook could be used more strategically to solicit feedback from users who engage with SFCG through social media channels. Finally, program participants and community members who participated in FGDs echoed other community conversations held by CDA by saying that SFCG staff should be "more present in the communities" with an implication that "this is how you can collect real-time feedback more consistently."

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