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COLLECTING FEEDBACK FROM BENEFICIARIES OF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

A GUIDE FOR USAID IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

September 2022

CONTRACT INFORMATION

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SUBMITTED BY

Shawn Peabody, Environmental Incentives

SUBMITTED TO

Soniya Mitra, Contracting Officer's Representative
USAID Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Environmental Incentives, LLC
725 15th Street NW, Floor 10
Washington, D.C. 20005
www.enviroincentives.com

AUTHORS

Jennifer Kuzara, PhD MPH, Social Solutions International, Inc.
L. Jerome Gallagher, DevTech Systems, Inc.

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CONTENTS

ACRONYMS 4

I. INTRODUCTION 5

II. KEY DEFINITIONS 8

III. THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK 11

IV. PLANNING FOR BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK COLLECTION 15

V. IDENTIFYING BENEFICIARIES FOR FEEDBACK 17

VI. DOMAINS OF FEEDBACK 23

VII. COLLECTING BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK 29

VIII. RESPONDING TO BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK 33

IX. CONCLUSION 36

ANNEX A. DATA COLLECTION APPROACHES 37

ANNEX B. REFERENCES 46

ACRONYMS

AO	Agreement Officer
AOR	Agreement Officer's Representative
CO	Contracting Officer
COR	Contracting Officer's Representative
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SEA	Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

I. INTRODUCTION

The notion that funders and implementers of social and development programs should listen to those who are intended to benefit from their programs is a simple idea that has grown in prominence over the past decade. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has long prioritized engagement with stakeholders in development programs, and has recently taken steps to elevate the collection and use of feedback from beneficiaries during program implementation.

Due to directives from Congress and recent changes in USAID policies, implementing partners of USAID development activities should expect to see–if they have not already–requests from USAID to include plans for collecting feedback from beneficiaries in their Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Plans.

While USAID's implementing partners have often been at the forefront of listening to the people who benefit from USAID development programs, efforts to intentionally collect, document, use, and report on beneficiary feedback may be new to some of USAID's partners. This guidance document is intended to help USAID implementing partners–both new and old–integrate beneficiary feedback into their USAID-funded development activities. It describes basic concepts of beneficiary feedback and good practices for collecting and responding to it.

BACKGROUND

USAID has a long history of prioritizing engagement with stakeholders to improve its programs, including those who live in the communities intended to benefit from USAID development efforts. In the 1970s as part of USAID "New Directions" reforms, for instance, USAID introduced social soundness reviews and beneficiary analysis into its planning for proposed programs.[1] In the 1990s, USAID's Sustainable Development approach emphasized participation of local people in USAID programming and basing assistance on their experience and ideas of what problems should be addressed.[2] In 2011, USAID introduced a new evaluation policy that declared consultation with beneficiaries as essential to ensure relevance of USAID programming.[3]

These previous efforts have typically focused on incorporating the voices of local stakeholders into the diagnosis of development gaps, the design of development activities, or evaluations of effectiveness as these programs come to a close. These stakeholders have sometimes included beneficiaries, but not always, and input from intermediaries has often stood in for direct input from intended beneficiaries in efforts to engage local voices.

More recently, practitioners in the social sector, humanitarian, and international development fields have revitalized thinking on engagement of intended beneficiaries in the programs meant to serve them, emphasizing the importance of listening to feedback about their experiences throughout program implementation for performance management.[4] Building on innovations from private-sector experiences in collecting customer feedback, this new call for collecting beneficiary feedback emphasizes ongoing

1 Tarnoff, Curt. U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID): Background, Operations, and Issues. R44117, Congressional Research Service, 21 July 2015.

2 Strategies for Sustainable Development. USAID, Mar. 1994.

3 USAID Evaluation Policy. USAID, Jan. 2011.

4 Twersky, Fay, et al. "Listening to Those Who Matter Most, the Beneficiaries." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, vol. 11, 2013, p. 4145. DOI.org (Datacite), https://doi.org/10.48558/8BWV-8A71.

engagement with those meant to benefit from programming, and timely collection of feedback to inform improvements to program implementation. It also aligns with broader efforts to recognize the dignity of program beneficiaries as partners in development and humanitarian work rather than passive recipients of interventions developed without their input.

U.S. leaders in Congress have been at the forefront of this trend. Since 2015, Congress has included special provisions to appropriations legislation directing USAID to use International Disaster Assistance funds for the regular and systematic collection of feedback directly from beneficiaries. In 2018 and the following years, Congress also applied the special provision to Development Assistance funds. The FY 2022 Consolidated Appropriations Act, for example, states that Development Assistance and International Disaster Assistance funds shall be made available for the regular and systematic collection of feedback directly from beneficiaries to enhance the quality and relevance of such assistance; and that USAID post on its website procedures for implementing partners for regularly and systematically collecting and responding to such feedback, including guidelines for reporting on actions taken in response to the feedback received.[5]

In response to these directives, USAID has incorporated the requirements for collecting feedback from beneficiaries into its internal policies for humanitarian and development programs. USAID guidelines for organizations applying for humanitarian funding are required to describe their process for beneficiary feedback. More recently, USAID revised its internal program cycle guidance for development activities to explicitly incorporate the collection and use of beneficiary feedback.[6] As a result, many USAID partners who implement development activities are now being required by USAID to include plans for collection of feedback from beneficiaries in their Activity MEL Plans.

PLEASE NOTE

USAID acknowledges the negative connotations of the term beneficiary. Many of the legislative and policy requirements to which USAID and its partners are accountable specifically employ this term, including the policies noted above as well as those that make USAID and its partners accountable for nondiscrimination. We have used the term here to align with the policies as they are currently written. In the coming months, USAID will undertake a process to engage in internal and external consultations to identify alternative terms and consider their use where applicable with the intention of completing this work by mid-2023.

5 H.R. 2471 - Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, section 7032(m)(1). Congress, in annual budget appropriations laws, has included special provisions for humanitarian assistance funds to be used for the collection of beneficiary feedback since 2015 and for Development Assistance funds to be used for the collection of beneficiary feedback since 2018.

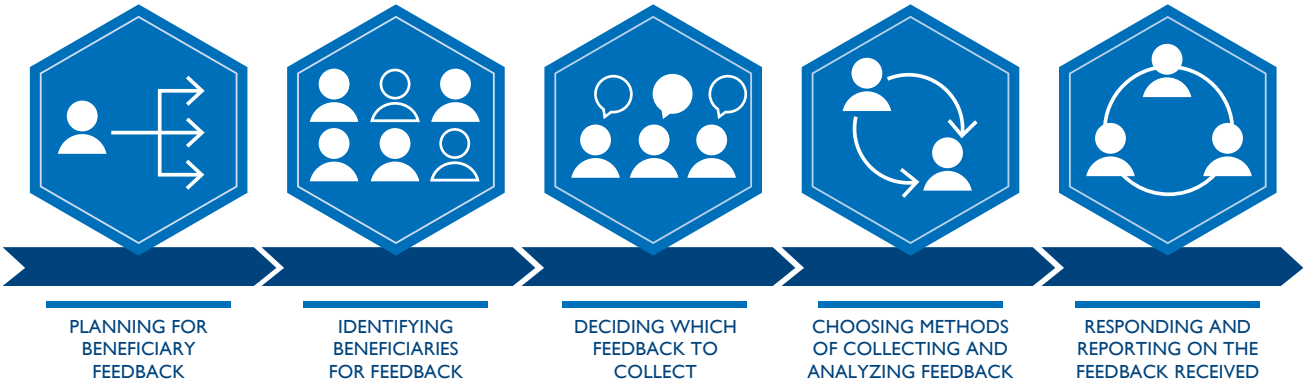
6 See ADS Chapter 201, The USAID Program Cycle Operational Policy, specifically sections 201.3.2.18 and 201.3.4.10.

HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

This guidance document is intended to help USAID implementing partners integrate beneficiary feedback into their USAID-funded development activities. While the information in this guide may be valuable for implementing partners of USAID-funded humanitarian activities, such activities differ from development activities in their requirements for beneficiary feedback collection. Implementing partners of humanitarian assistance programs should refer to policies and guidance provided by the USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance.

This document describes basic concepts of beneficiary feedback and general good practices for collecting and responding to it. This document does not, however, dictate the specific measures an implementing partner should take to collect and respond to feedback from beneficiaries. USAID implementing partners should always refer to their contract or award agreement for any specific requirements regarding the collection of beneficiary feedback.

COLLECTING FEEDBACK



II. KEY DEFINITIONS

In this section, we define some key terms that clarify the scope of this guidance. In particular, we discuss how this guide uses the terms "development activity," "beneficiary," and "beneficiary feedback," as well as how we distinguish "feedback" from other kinds of input.

DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

This guidance is intended for USAID implementing partners who implement USAID "development activities," which is a term used here to describe USAID programming implemented through a contract or award agreement that aims to achieve a development purpose in a foreign country or region where USAID operates. These activities typically require the implementing partner to prepare an Activity MEL Plan. This includes not only foreign assistance activities funded from the Development Assistance account, but also those funded from other bilateral economic assistance accounts, such as the Global Health Programs account and the Economic Support Funds account. It does not include humanitarian activities, such as disaster assistance and emergency food assistance activities; transition activities managed by the Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization's Office of Transition Initiatives; or USAID Mission support services, which do not directly generate a development result.

BENEFICIARIES

For the purpose of this guide, a beneficiary is defined as any person who is a recipient of, derives advantage from, or is helped by USAID development assistance.[7] While every development activity has beneficiaries, not every individual or organization engaged with USAID or involved in a development activity as a stakeholder is also a beneficiary. Beneficiaries of USAID programming are not U.S. citizens or USAID employees. Beneficiaries also are not generally providers of USAID development assistance unless they receive USAID assistance in addition to providing USAID assistance. For example, members of a local organization that has a USAID contract to implement a development activity and that also receives capacity-strengthening training through USAID would only be considered beneficiaries as a result of the capacity-strengthening support received.

Finally, local governments, communities, businesses, civic groups, and other program stakeholders who may have reason to be interested or engaged in a USAID development program but are not intended to benefit from the program are not beneficiaries. The intent of this guidance is to encourage practices that center the voices of those intended to benefit from development programming. Further details and discussion of beneficiaries are in Section V, "Identifying Beneficiaries for Feedback."

7 USAID ADS Glossary. https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ADS_Glossary.pdf

BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK

Beneficiary feedback refers here to the perceptions or reactions that are voluntarily communicated directly by a beneficiary of USAID development assistance about that assistance This type of feedback is often referred to as "perceptual feedback" because it concerns the perspectives, feelings, and opinions of a beneficiary.[8]

Perceptual feedback from beneficiaries is just one type of feedback that might be useful for an implementing partner to collect and respond to during program implementation. This guide specifically addresses feedback provided by beneficiaries themselves, and does not address other kinds of feedback or monitoring data that might be relevant to a development program and used for program management. For example, routine monitoring of a training program might show that participants are leaving the course before the expected completion date. Or, training facilitators might observe and report that participants seem uninterested in the course material. These are both examples of valuable feedback that pertains to beneficiaries, but it is not perceptual feedback communicated by beneficiaries. Further discussion of different kinds of beneficiary feedback is provided in Section VI, "Domains of Feedback."

BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK VS. LOCAL ENGAGEMENT

USAID's commitment to localization involves incorporating local voices into all aspects of USAID's work, from setting priorities to implementing solutions. Collecting and responding to beneficiary feedback should be a critical part of every implementing partner's local engagement efforts and USAID's larger localization efforts. But, the term"beneficiary feedback" does not include all of the ways local voices are engaged and incorporated into USAID development programs; nor does collecting and responding to beneficiary feedback replace larger efforts to consult, engage, and shift power to local actors. Moreover, engaging local stakeholders in decisions about development programming does not, by itself, guarantee the robust representation of those primarily affected by development programs. In particular, marginalized[9] and underrepresented groups may not be fully represented in such consultations. Stakeholders exist within a system that includes power dynamics; they may or may not be in a position to articulate or represent the needs and concerns of all the individuals living in their communities, who are likely to demonstrate diversity in interests, perspectives, and lived experiences, as well as in perceptions of development programming and its relevance, acceptability, and accessibility. This guidance document concerns only beneficiary feedback and is not intended to encompass all of the other ways USAID or its partners should engage with stakeholders and other local actors.

BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK VS. INPUT ABOUT NEEDS

Beneficiary feedback as described here primarily concerns beneficiaries' reactions to the USAID implementing partner's *interventions as implemented*. It does not include the important process of collecting input from potential beneficiaries or others affected by development programming regarding local development gaps or individual needs *prior* to implementation. In preparation for the design of a USAID activity, USAID often conducts assessments to better understand development gaps and help prioritize development objectives. Similarly, USAID implementing partners typically analyze and assess development gaps to inform their plan to achieve the objectives of the development activity. While such assessments and analyses typically include collecting input from potential beneficiaries about their needs and are an important part of local engagement in activity design and planning, we define this as falling into the category of "input". It is unquestionably valuable, but it does not satisfy the need to collect feedback on a program as it is being implemented or after it has been implemented, which we define as "beneficiary feedback" and describe in this guidance.

8 See, for example, Ekoute Consulting. *Perceptual Feedback: What's it All about?* Fund for Shared Insight, May 2021.

9 Marginalized groups are "people who are typically denied access to legal protection or social and economic participation and programs…whether in practice or in principle, for historical, cultural, political, and/or other contextual reasons. Such groups may include, but are not limited to, women and girls, persons with disabilities, LGBTI people, displaced persons, migrants, indigenous individuals and communities, youth and the elderly, religious minorities, ethnic minorities, people in lower castes, and people of diverse economic class and political opinions." (*Suggested Approaches for Integrating Inclusive Development Across the Program Cycle and in Mission Operations*, USAID, 2018.)

While beneficiary feedback primarily concerns development interventions that are currently being implemented or that have completed implementation, there are a few exceptions. Beneficiary feedback may also address pilot or prototype interventions, or even hypothetical plans for an intervention in the early phases of activity implementation. For example, asking various local social service non-governmental organizations (NGOs) about capacity-strengthening needs is an important part of designing appropriate interventions for a social service capacity-strengthening activity, but such a needs assessment is not considered beneficiary feedback. However, asking for feedback from NGO staff on your specific plans to provide them with capacity-strengthening training or getting feedback from participants in a pilot training would be described here as beneficiary feedback.

BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK VS. MECHANISMS FOR REPORTING ADVERSE IMPACTS

Feedback from beneficiaries often includes negative feedback, including grievances, complaints, and concerns, and it may even include reports of adverse impacts to individuals, communities, and the environment due to USAID-funded programs; waste and fraud involving USAID funds; or abuse of individuals by staff engaged in implementing development programs. When negative feedback collected from beneficiaries rises to the level of a report of waste, fraud, abuse, or adverse impacts, such feedback must be addressed appropriately by USAID Implementing Partners as discussed in Section VIII, "Responding to Beneficiary Feedback." However, this guidance is focused on neither the establishment of mechanisms that are specifically focused on collecting reports from beneficiaries regarding waste, fraud, abuse, or adverse impacts, nor the processes for responding to those complaints. For more information, USAID implementing partners should refer to the USAID Acquisition and Assistance Ombudsman, USAID Office of Inspector General (OIG), and USAID's guidance for implementing partners on preventing sexual misconduct.

III. THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK

It seems almost self-evident that development practitioners should listen to the people who they expect to benefit from their programs. But implementers of development programs have many time-sensitive responsibilities that may supersede other concerns at any moment during the life of an activity, from implementation itself to monitoring delivery of services, tracking financial records, and reporting to donors. Developing and following through on a plan to collect beneficiary feedback can fall behind in a list of pressing priorities. With monitoring efforts often focused on indicators, adding the collection of feedback directly from beneficiaries can seem a daunting and potentially time intensive addition to a monitoring plan. For some activities, even identifying the beneficiaries of an activity and finding ways to reach them can be a challenge.

STRENGTHS

Despite these challenges, beneficiary feedback is a valuable data source that should be an essential component of the information that informs the management of development programs. When implementing partners incorporate beneficiary feedback into their regular monitoring and evaluation approaches, they create an opportunity for those who are intended to benefit from programming to voice their preferences, needs, concerns, and ideas directly to program implementers. There is inherent value in ensuring that those whose lives are directly impacted by development programming have these opportunities. There are also several ways in which this type of information can strengthen programming. Here are a few of the potential strengths of collecting beneficiary feedback.

1. Timely indication of implementation progress or problems. There is often a considerable gap in the time between when a development intervention is implemented to when the intended outcomes of that intervention might be realized. It can take months or years between intervention and outcome for some programs. Beneficiary feedback, though, can be collected during or immediately after an intervention activity to help understand if beneficiaries find the intervention acceptable and if they are satisfied with its quality. Beneficiaries also have an understanding of their own local communities and context that even a very engaged implementer may lack. While positive beneficiary feedback does not necessarily mean that the activity will ultimately achieve its intended outcomes, it can assure implementers that beneficiaries are having a positive experience with the activity. Negative feedback may indicate that there are design flaws or implementation issues to address. Addressing these concerns can improve people's experience with the program, mitigate challenges that decrease the quality of a program, and increase the likelihood that intended outcomes will be achieved. Early and frequent collection of beneficiary feedback can help an implementing partner catch these issues before they become major problems that waste program resources or cause unintentional harm.

2. Explanation of outcomes. Once the outcomes of a development intervention are measured, the collection of feedback from beneficiaries can provide information to help understand their experience of program outcomes. Beneficiaries provide unique perspectives and insights on whether the theory of change–from intervention to outputs to outcomes–proceeded as expected or why outcomes may have failed to materialize. For example, regular monitoring of an indicator on course attendance can tell an implementer that a training program has a 20 percent attrition rate, but it can't help them understand why participants are dropping out. Talking directly with those who attended the training course (both those who completed the course and those who dropped out) can help the implementer identify aspects of the venue, timing, or instruction that caused attendees inconvenience or discomfort. Beneficiaries can also provide feedback on how the program affected them in positive or negative ways that were not anticipated by the program design.

3. Ideas for adaptation and improvement. Feedback from beneficiaries need not just focus on whether or why they are satisfied or unsatisfied with a development program. Beneficiaries are important sources of knowledge about their own choices and behaviors and the unique and complex social world in which they are embedded. They can offer insights on what motivates behavior change, as well as on the ripple effects that may result from changes in community or family life or in personal experience resulting from a development program. Feedback from beneficiaries can be a source of concrete suggestions or recommendations for adapting the program to enhance accessibility, increase participation, improve outcomes, mitigate challenges, and preempt potential harms.

4. Strong partnerships. Creating space for beneficiaries to voice their opinions on the implementation of development interventions gives implementing partners an opportunity to build trust and strengthen their relationships with beneficiaries. By integrating feedback into key decisions, implementers demonstrate their commitment to engaging beneficiaries as partners in program implementation. Engagement with beneficiaries as partners in this way is crucial to responsive development programming; ultimately, it improves the likelihood of program success and the sustainability of program outcomes.

5. Commitment to inclusion and nondiscrimination. Donors and implementing partners bear a duty to people who are affected by development programming–especially those who are underrepresented, marginalized, those who may be critical of local power holders (including development stakeholders), and those who do not have other avenues for expressing their perspectives. USAID policy requires that its partners not discriminate against beneficiaries by withholding, adversely impacting, or denying equitable access to benefits on the basis of race, color, religion, sex (including gender identity, sexual orientation, and pregnancy), national origin, disability, age, genetic information, marital status, parental status, political affiliation, or veteran's status when these factors are not explicitly stated in the award (e.g., for the purpose of targeting activities toward the assistance needs of certain populations).[10] USAID further recognizes that the "inclusion, protection, and empowerment of all persons is critical because drawing on the full contributions of the entire population leads to more effective, comprehensive, and sustainable development results. Everyone who works with USAID–staff and implementing partners alike–is expected to uphold principles of inclusion and equitable access to USAID-funded programming".[11] Collecting feedback directly from beneficiaries, including from those in marginalized and underrepresented groups, helps implementers identify when and where their intended beneficiaries may be encountering challenges in accessing programming and reaping its full benefits, and it helps them work with those communities to identify solutions and improve programming.

10 See Nondiscrimination for Beneficiaries: Frequently Asked Questions, as well as USAID Acquisition Regulation (AIDAR) and ADS Chapter 303 Grants and Cooperative Agreements to Non-Governmental Organizations.

11 See Promoting Nondiscrimination and Inclusive Development in USAID Funded Programs: A Mandatory Reference for ADS Chapter 200.

Systematic evidence of the impact of beneficiary feedback on achieving program outcomes is still limited, but a review of studies by the Feedback Labs suggests that while feedback can have significant impact on development outcomes, it works best under conditions "when people are sufficiently empowered to fully participate, when the technical conditions are appropriate, and when the donor and/or government agency has both the willingness and capacity to respond [to the feedback]."[12]

LIMITATIONS

Beneficiary feedback is not a panacea, though, for improving development programs. Here are a few limitations to keep in mind when collecting beneficiary feedback.

1. Beneficiary feedback is just one source of information. While the collection of beneficiary feedback should be part of most development programs, it is just one data source within the wider constellation of data and evidence that should be collected during program implementation. It cannot replace monitoring inputs, outputs, and outcomes. For example, feedback from beneficiaries about the quality of teaching in a training program may be useful but is not as informative about learning outcomes as a before-and-after test of knowledge. Collecting feedback about beneficiary satisfaction with program services is useful, but is often more useful when paired with quantitative participant attrition data or measures of how often or how long a participant engages with a program.

2. Beneficiaries don't necessarily make good evaluators. Just because program beneficiaries report being satisfied with a program or that they believe it has benefited them in some way does not mean the program has had a net positive impact on intended outcomes. Some studies have found a positive correlation between subjective measures of beneficiary satisfaction and program outcomes. For instance, in a study of medical care in U.S. hospitals, Glickman et al.[13] found that higher rates of patient satisfaction were associated with lower mortality rates. But such findings are atypical for many programs. For example, in a study of job training programs, Smith et al.[14] found no correlation between participant evaluations of program benefits and econometric evidence of program impact. Responses to questions relating to perception, especially of quality or satisfaction, can be influenced by several factors, including how challenging the respondent finds the question, how they think others might respond, and how they think the data collector wants them to respond[15]. Perceptual feedback from beneficiaries about a program is an unreliable proxy for program outcomes and should not be relied upon as a measure of end-line outcomes or impact without further evidence.

3. Beneficiary feedback may not be actionable. In an ideal scenario, feedback collected from beneficiaries would be consistent and would point to program deficiencies that are clearly identifiable and easily corrected by program decision makers. In reality, beneficiary feedback is often messy and closing the feedback loop can be a challenge. Feedback received might not aggregate neatly because of high levels of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the program. Aspects of the program that some beneficiaries see as negative may be viewed positively by others. Recommendations for improvement provided by beneficiaries may be contradictory. While contradictory feedback can often be informative for implementing partners, especially if it points to ways in which specific groups of people experience

12 Sarkisova, Elina. *Is Feedback Smart?* Feedback Labs, June 2016.

13 Glickman, Seth W., et al. "Patient Satisfaction and Its Relationship With Clinical Quality and Inpatient Mortality in Acute Myocardial Infarction." *Circulation: Cardiovascular Quality and Outcomes*, vol. 3, no. 2, Mar. 2010, pp. 188–95, as cited in Sarkisova, Elina. *Is Feedback Smart?* Feedback Labs, June 2016.

14 Smith, Jeffrey, et al. *Are Program Participants Good Evaluators?* IZA DP No. 13584, IZA Institute of Labor Economics, Aug. 2020, https://docs.iza.org/dp13584.pdf.

15 See, for example, Pasek, J., & Krosnick, J. A. (2010). Optimizing survey questionnaire design in political science: Insights from psychology. In J. Leighley (Ed.), Oxford Handbook of American Elections and Political Behavior. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

a program differently from one another, it may require more than a simple tweak to implementation to address. Or, feedback from beneficiaries may be uniform in nature but point to issues or concerns that are outside of the control of program implementers to address due to a lack of resources or power.

4. Beneficiary feedback can be costly to both implementers and beneficiaries. In some cases, feedback can be fairly easy to collect, such as passive collection of feedback from social media or quick feedback captured from program participants at point of service. In other cases, though, feedback collection can be costly for implementing partners. Systematic large-scale collection of beneficiary feedback, for instance through household surveys, can be prohibitively expensive, especially for small activities. When the ultimate beneficiaries of a program are not directly engaged in its implementation, just identifying and reaching them may take considerable resources, even more so if they include hard-to-reach marginalized groups or are spread out over a wide geographic area. Even when beneficiary feedback collection is simple, analyzing and responding to it will require time and resources of implementing partners. Beneficiaries also bear costs of providing feedback. What may seem to donors and program implementers to be a small request of time and effort can still be a burden and an opportunity cost to program beneficiaries. The provision of feedback is often uncompensated and those providing it may not benefit from the improvements that implementing partners integrate into their future programming or their work in other communities. Multiple requests for feedback over time can be especially costly to beneficiaries and lead to a decrease in the quality of feedback provided.

All forms of program data have limitations, and beneficiary feedback data is no different. But such limitations need not halt efforts to collect feedback. Rather, these limitations should inform implementing partners' plans for collecting and using beneficiary feedback as efficiently and effectively as possible. When done well, the collection and analysis of beneficiary feedback has considerable potential for helping program managers improve the program and ultimately provide greater benefit to program beneficiaries.

IV. PLANNING FOR BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK COLLECTION

Implementing partners of USAID development activities are typically required to submit an Activity MEL Plan as a requirement of their award, the contents of which are subject to the individual contract or agreement between USAID and the implementing partner. USAID staff are expected to work with implementing partners to ensure that the implementing partner's Activity MEL Plan addresses any specific requirements for meeting USAID information needs and external reporting requirements, and allows for the management and oversight of contracts by USAID. Typically, implementing partners are expected to submit an Activity MEL Plan in the first 90 days of an award and have a USAID approved Activity MEL Plan in place before major implementation actions begin.

In addition to information about monitoring indicators, planned evaluations, and learning activities, the Activity MEL Plan is where USAID implementing partners propose their plans for collecting, responding to, and reporting on beneficiary feedback. Each beneficiary feedback plan within an Activity MEL Plan will differ due to a variety of factors, including the size, scope, and complexity of the USAID-funded development activity. In general, though, it is good practice for the beneficiary feedback plan within the Activity MEL Plan to describe:

1. A determination on whether collecting beneficiary feedback is appropriate for the activity. Most USAID development activities should expect to collect feedback from beneficiaries. However, if the implementing partner determines that collecting beneficiary feedback is inappropriate for the activity, then the USAID Agreement Officer's Representative (AOR)/Contracting Officer's Representive (COR) should be consulted and a written explanation for why the collection of beneficiary feedback is not appropriate for their activity should be provided in the Activity MEL Plan. Reasons for not collecting beneficiary feedback may be based on the size or nature of the activity, impracticality of identifying and/or soliciting feedback from beneficiaries, or risks to the implementing partner and/or the beneficiaries.

2. Plans for collecting feedback from beneficiaries. Implementing partners should describe in sufficient detail the major aspects of their plans for collecting feedback from beneficiaries, including: how the different groups of intended beneficiaries of the activity will be defined and identified; the various data collection methods expected to be used to collect feedback; how often feedback will be collected; and how the implementing partner will ensure that feedback collection methods are safe, accessible, and confidential. Plans for safely managing the feedback data collected should be included in the implementing partner's Data Management Plan (DMP). Sections V through VII of this document provide further details on these topics.

3. Procedures for responding to feedback from beneficiaries. Implementing partners should describe how they plan to incorporate beneficiary feedback information into activity decision making; whether or how the implementing partner expects to report back to beneficiaries about the feedback received and the resulting decisions made; and how the implementing partner will respond to any critical or sensitive protection issues that arise from feedback received, as appropriate. This topic is discussed in more detail in Section VIII.

4. Processes for reporting to USAID about feedback received from beneficiaries. Implementing partners should describe how and when they will report a summary of the feedback information to USAID, and how the implementing partner will report on any actions taken to address issues that arise from the beneficiary feedback. For many activities, such reports may be part of the activity's regular progress reports that are provided to USAID on a quarterly, semi-annual, or annual basis. This topic is discussed in more detail in Section VIII.

An example template for an Activity MEL plan is available on USAID's Learning Lab. It provides a suggested outline and basic guidance for developing an Activity MEL Plan by a USAID implementing partner. While the beneficiary feedback plan is listed as its own section of the template–separated from monitoring, evaluation, and learning sections–this is a structural feature of the template rather than a conceptual recommendation. Planning and implementing beneficiary feedback collection should be integrated with other monitoring, evaluation, and learning tasks. Tasks such as routine monitoring site visits may provide opportunities for collecting beneficiary feedback. Conversely, knowledge gained from beneficiary feedback can often support performance monitoring objectives and help answer evaluation and learning questions.

Once approved by USAID, the Activity MEL Plan may be shared with other partners and stakeholders, including program beneficiaries. The Activity MEL Plan–including plans for collecting, responding to, and reporting on beneficiary feedback–should be revised and updated regularly and as needed in response to implementation milestones, changes in the design of the development activity, or changes in the activity's context that occur during the life of the development activity. USAID review and approval processes for revisions and updates to the Activity MEL Plan are often prescribed in the award or agreement. In many cases, regular review and approval of the Activity MEL Plan is completed annually.

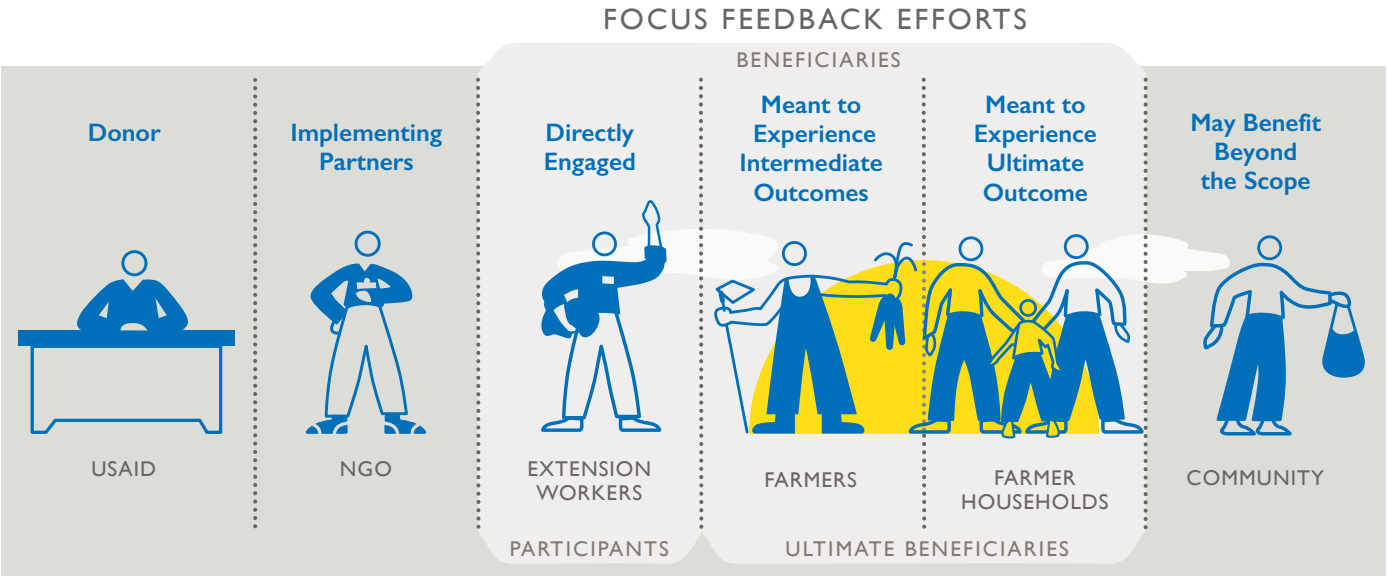
V. IDENTIFYING BENEFICIARIES FOR FEEDBACK

Collecting beneficiary feedback begins by answering the question, "Who are our beneficiaries?" As previously noted, for the purpose of this guide, *beneficiary* is defined as any person who is a recipient of, derives advantage from, or is helped by USAID development assistance. Beneficiaries are not the only group from whom it is valuable to collect feedback, but they are a particularly important group and the focus of this guide.

While the definition of beneficiary presented in this guide may be fairly straightforward, determining the specific individuals from whom to collect feedback may be a complicated endeavor for many development activities. In general, determining from whom feedback should be collected involves three steps. First, it involves identifying the beneficiaries–and different beneficiary groups–of a particular activity. Second, it requires prioritizing which groups of beneficiaries to collect feedback from. Third, it requires selecting the individual respondents in feedback collection exercises, which relates directly to the data collection methods selected for soliciting feedback.

IDENTIFYING BENEFICIARIES

Who constitutes a beneficiary of a program depends primarily on two factors: how the program engages with individuals over the life of the program, and what the ultimate purpose of the program is. For some programs, identifying beneficiaries may be simple. For example, for a program that provides direct food aid to families to improve their nutritional intake, the recipients of the food aid are the beneficiaries. In this case, the individuals who come into direct contact with the program are also the ones who are expected to ultimately benefit from the program. Whether to collect feedback from all the beneficiaries or a sample of them still requires further decision-making (as discussed below), but the identification of the beneficiaries should be relatively straightforward.



DIRECT, INTERMEDIATE, AND ULTIMATE BENEFICIARIES

In contrast to the simple program described above, the identification of program beneficiaries may be less straightforward for more complex development activities. Consider a program that seeks to improve the living standards of smallholder farmer households through the funding and training of national agricultural extension specialists. USAID provides grant funding to an experienced agricultural NGO to train agricultural extension specialists on innovations in crop management so that they can, in turn, assist smallholder farmers throughout the country. Who are the beneficiaries in this scenario? The agricultural NGO is a *recipient* of donor funds, but is more accurately characterized as an *implementing partner*, not a beneficiary. While this NGO certainly benefits from these funds, the intent of the donor is not to benefit the NGO, but to partner with them under conditions specified in their grant agreement to achieve a development objective. The agricultural extension specialists are not part of the NGO implementing partner but are *participants* in the NGO training and *recipients* of the NGO's services.

The agricultural extension specialists are expected to gain skills from these services and it seems reasonable to consider them *beneficiaries* of the program. As they are in direct contact with the implementing partner, we may consider them *direct beneficiaries* of the program. However, the agricultural extension specialists are not the individuals this program is ultimately intended to benefit. Rather, they are intermediaries between the implementing partner of the development program and the *ultimate intended beneficiaries* of the development program. *Ultimate intended beneficiaries* are the individuals, especially the socially and economically disadvantaged, who the development program is ultimately expecting to benefit the most from the program. In this case, the ultimate intended beneficiaries are the farmers and the members of the farmer households whose living standards are expected to rise as a result of the transfer of knowledge from the agricultural extension specialists to smallholder farmers.

Ultimate intended beneficiaries may or may not directly interact with the implementing partner. When programs employ complex interventions that involve results chains with many steps, there may be a series of *intermediate beneficiaries* between the direct beneficiaries and the ultimate intended beneficiaries. A variation of the agricultural extension program described above might include agricultural extension specialists working with a lead farmer in each community they serve, who in turn shares practices with many farmers in their community. These lead farmers would be another *intermediate beneficiary* between the agricultural extension specialists and the members of the smallholder farmer households.

The point of making distinctions between direct beneficiaries, intermediate beneficiaries, and ultimate intended beneficiaries is not to overly complicate the notion of "beneficiary," but to assist the process of collecting beneficiary feedback. Development practitioners are accountable to those who are affected by development programs, even when they have not directly engaged with the key interventions. Implementers have different obligations to each of these groups of individuals, and are likely to gain different programmatic advantages from talking with each of them. The agricultural extension specialists who engage directly in the program can tell the implementing partner whether the training courses are useful to them and how they can be improved, or what other inputs might be helpful to them in transferring skills. The farmers assisted by the agricultural extension specialists can tell implementers how relevant and useful the agricultural extension program is to addressing their needs and what else they might need to employ the skills they have learned. Those who live in the households of the farmers can tell implementers whether household food security has improved and whether the program had any unanticipated negative consequences.

INTENDED AND UNINTENDED BENEFICIARIES

Our discussion above of beneficiaries deliberately includes not only those individuals who actually benefit from development programs but all those who are *intended* to benefit from development programs. This slight broadening of who is a beneficiary serves a few purposes. First, intended beneficiaries can provide feedback on plans and decisions that are made during program implementation prior to realizing the benefits of a program. For example, something as simple as asking for feedback on the schedule of planned training events with the intended beneficiaries can potentially improve attendance.

More importantly, development activities may fail to achieve their intended outcomes, either generally or for certain people they were meant to benefit. Intended beneficiaries may have engaged with a program but dropped out, they may have attempted to engage but encountered barriers, they may have heard of a program but opted not to engage, or they may not have learned enough about the program to engage with it. For instance, an activity that provides new prenatal health services to pregnant women can learn from feedback from pregnant women who heard about the new services, but chose not to seek them out. It doesn't make much sense to ask for feedback about their experience with an intervention that they have no knowledge of, but getting more information about why individuals choose not to participate can be helpful for improving engagement efforts.

Development activities may also fail to benefit those individuals that they were intended to benefit because the intervention itself failed for those individuals. For example, a program to help build job market skills of marginalized youth may fail to help some program participants find jobs. Collecting feedback from these intended beneficiaries about the program they participated in and their experience on the job market can potentially help the implementer find other ways to assist the participants or adapt the program for future delivery.

A development program may also have *unintended* beneficiaries. For example, if the agricultural extension program described above is going well, farmers in neighboring communities that were not targeted by the program might hear about it and start emulating innovative techniques of farmers who were targeted by the program. These smallholder farmers and their households might end up benefiting from the agricultural extension program even though they were not its intended beneficiaries. A program may benefit from understanding such effects, but these individuals are unlikely to be able to provide much feedback on aspects of the program itself or its intended results. Input from them would generally not be considered "beneficiary feedback."

PRIORITIZING FROM WHOM TO COLLECT FEEDBACK

Once beneficiaries have been identified, the next step is to prioritize and determine which beneficiaries to collect feedback from at different points in programming. It might be possible for some development programs to collect feedback from all possible beneficiaries, including all intermediate beneficiaries and all ultimate intended beneficiaries, but this is typically not feasible or even desirable for most development programs. Instead, most implementing partners will need to set priorities within the resource constraints of their programs. These decisions should be driven primarily by the intended use of the information. Feedback can help improve the quality of programming, the success of engagement efforts, the effectiveness of interventions in achieving intermediate and ultimate outcomes, or the equitability of programming in reaching specific groups of people. For each of these purposes, different groups of beneficiaries can provide different insights at different times during program implementation.

DIRECT, INTERMEDIATE, AND ULTIMATE BENEFICIARIES

In general, it is good practice to collect feedback from both those who directly participate or receive assistance from a program and–when those individuals are not the ones who ultimately benefit from the program–from the ultimate intended beneficiaries as well. Direct beneficiaries may provide the most valuable and timely feedback for addressing implementation issues and understanding intermediate results, while information on ultimate outcomes (as in a program evaluation) is more likely to require feedback from ultimate beneficiaries. Among these two groups, we recommend prioritizing the ultimate intended beneficiaries as the most important group for beneficiary feedback collection, since improving outcomes for the ultimate intended beneficiaries is the reason for the existence of the development program.

While it is almost always both useful and feasible to get feedback from beneficiaries who directly interact with the development program, whether it is useful or feasible to get feedback from ultimate intended beneficiaries who don't interact with the development program depends on the circumstances of the program. Consider a development program that helps provide economic policy advice to a national ministry. The ultimate beneficiaries are all citizens of the country. However, getting feedback from a sample of citizens about the economic advice provided by the development program is likely to be costly and unlikely to be particularly useful. Feedback from staff at the national ministry (i.e., the direct beneficiaries) who interacted with the program would likely provide more actionable information.

In the case of the agricultural extension program discussed earlier, though, obtaining feedback from the farmers' households (i.e., the ultimate beneficiaries of the program) is likely to be extremely useful and should be prioritized. Improving outcomes for these ultimate beneficiaries is the reason for the existence of the program, and they are likely to provide valuable feedback on how they have experienced or been affected by the program. In the end, decisions about prioritizing feedback from direct, intermediate, and ultimate beneficiaries involve considerable judgment.

GROUP CHARACTERISTICS OF BENEFICIARIES

Implementing partners should also consider beneficiary characteristics (such as gender, ethnicity, age, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and location), when prioritizing feedback for collection. Relevant beneficiary group characteristics are often considered during sectoral or needs assessments to support program design; such assessments can also inform prioritizing from whom to collect feedback.

Beneficiaries are likely to have different experiences with the development program based on such characteristics. Service quality of a program may differ from one program site to the next; disabled beneficiaries may have greater difficulty accessing the program or all its benefits relative to able-bodied beneficiaries; women beneficiaries may value the relevance of a program to a greater or lesser degree than men. Capturing a wide range of perspectives from different beneficiary groups can be as, if not more important as capturing the most typical perspective. Uncovering unequal levels of satisfaction with a program across beneficiary groups can help implementing partners enhance program equity. Implementers should particularly consider prioritizing feedback from intended beneficiaries of marginalized groups to fully understand the challenges they may face in engaging with a program.

SELECTING RESPONDENTS

Once implementers have identified the people who could benefit from their program, and prioritized which groups of beneficiaries to solicit information from, they must establish a means for selecting individual respondents in feedback collection exercises. The appropriate approaches for selecting respondents will depend on the data collection method being used and on how implementers intend to analyze feedback and use findings. See Annex A for more in-depth sampling considerations related to specific data collection approaches.

Most programs will not be in a position to get feedback from every intended beneficiary. Some modes of feedback collection are passive in nature: an implementer does not solicit feedback directly from selected individuals, but instead provides contact information or another means for beneficiaries to volunteer feedback. These can be made broadly available, though it is difficult to guarantee that all beneficiaries will have equal access to the specific means, such as the ability to make a private phone call, or reliable internet access. When program staff want to solicit feedback directly, they will need to make decisions about who they will request feedback from. These are the respondents.

There are many approaches for identifying respondents to provide feedback on a program; the best approach depends on the nature of the data collection exercise and how the information will be used. The first decision-point for many implementers will be whether they need to be able to generalize conclusions from the feedback to an entire population. This is likely to be the case when the information needs to be quantified and used to make inferences about a group of beneficiaries (which may encompass an entire community, catchment area, or other geographic area). For example, when the implementer intends to conduct a survey to assess the proportion of a population that perceives basic services to be of a certain quality, or when they wish to quantify the proportion of a population that feels local governance is responsive to their needs, the generalizability of the data is likely to be an important consideration in selecting respondents. In these kinds of circumstances, large-scale, population-representative surveys may be the only way of collecting the type of data desired.

When direct participants are documented through program records, these records can form the basis of a representative selection approach that will allow implementers to generalize to the group of direct participants. This is common when programming engages specific individuals, for example in training, workforce development, or economic growth programs, or when programming encompasses all the students enrolled at a specific health center, school, or other institution. In these cases, it is often possible to list and verify all the participants of the program.

If implementers need information from intended but non-participating beneficiaries, intermediate beneficiaries, or ultimate beneficiaries that they can use to generalize about the population or that will allow them to use inferential analyses, they may need other approaches, for example a survey of the communities intended to benefit.

When beneficiaries are defined by whether they access a service, respondents for qualitative data collection methods may be chosen through some form of convenience sampling; for example, if the intention is to get feedback from people who have used a clinic, clean water access point, or other community resource, then respondents can be selected from among those who are entering, leaving, or using the site. This will provide information about those who are actively using the service.

In some cases, implementers will want information from an array of individuals who are eligible for a service or who are intended to benefit from a service. For qualitative data collection approaches, purposive selection may be suitable when implementers want to understand the experiences of a specific group of beneficiaries. In general, however, implementers will benefit from obtaining a broad array of experiences and perspectives.

When collecting qualitative feedback, implementers should document the selection approaches used to provide the necessary context against which to interpret qualitative findings. Qualitative data collection approaches do not require the kind of sampling that ensures representativeness; but they can be vulnerable to biases when insufficient diversity is sought or when respondents are (whether intentionally or unintentionally) selected in ways that privilege those with positive experiences with a program or who will reinforce the perspectives of local power-holders.

In some circumstances, snowball sampling can be a useful approach for collecting qualitative feedback. In this technique, identified respondents who meet the criteria help to identify additional individuals who can serve as respondents. It is particularly useful when attempting to find respondents among groups that are harder to identify or access (such as marginalized groups, mobile groups, those with particular knowledge, or those who may be stigmatized by their engagement with a program). It may also be used to elucidate perspectives from groups on opposing sides of an issue, such as in peacebuilding interventions by asking respondents questions like "Who holds too much power on this issue?" and following up with those they name for additional feedback and so on.

VI. DOMAINS OF FEEDBACK

Implementers can collect feedback from beneficiaries on many issues and use it in a variety of ways. In this guidance, we suggest eight distinct domains of feedback that implementers may consider collecting. These domains are not mutually exclusive, nor are they intended to capture every possible type of feedback an implementer may wish to obtain; rather they are intended to help implementers conceptualize what kinds of feedback from beneficiaries will be most useful during program implementation. These domains are each addressed in greater detail below, along with reflections on how feedback in each domain can be meaningfully collected and utilized over the life of any activity.

RELEVANCE AND ACCEPTABILITY

The relevance of a program concerns whether it has addressed a need or priority that was of actual importance to the communities intended to be served. How to define relevance for any particular program is a matter to be determined between local stakeholders (including intended beneficiaries), implementing partners, and USAID representatives. A program can be relevant even if some respondents feel that other issues are more pressing than those addressed by the program. An overall concept of relevance will include whether anticipated programming addresses a real barrier or gap as well as information on the resources already available to people in the area.

A conception of relevance should include input from people in the communities where programming will be implemented with respect to what they think will most clearly address the issues they face, typically collected as a program is being planned and bounded by definitions of relevance pertaining to the core sectoral area of focus. For example, those designing a program aiming to reduce maternal mortality are unlikely to benefit from knowing that some people in the communities to be served would rather have programming addressing economic opportunities, or even other health issues; but they can explore the relevance and preferences for options to address maternal mortality, including strengthening the health system, addressing maternal nutrition, providing access to effective birth control, or supporting birth planning. Understanding relevance may entail asking respondents what kinds of solutions they would most want to see for a set of problems an implementer wishes to help address, or which among a selection of issues they prioritize.

It should be noted that engaging communities in identifying relevant solutions to their development challenges is not the same as getting feedback from beneficiaries on the relevance of programs that have been or are being implemented. Even for programs that have engaged community input during planning stages, getting feedback on relevance over the life of the program can add value. First, the input received during planning may not reflect the priorities of all members of a community. By continuing to seek feedback on relevance during implementation, implementers open new opportunities for beneficiaries or intended beneficiaries to share their perspectives, including those who may have been left out of efforts to collect input at planning stages. Second, the context in which a program is implemented can shift over time, including in ways that affect the

relevance of a program or its approaches. If an implementer learns over the course of implementation that their program's relevance to beneficiaries has shifted, they can adapt their approaches accordingly and make future decisions in light of changing beneficiary perspectives.

Acceptability is closely related to relevance; it refers to whether the approaches to addressing an issue are in line with the values, preferences, and cultural perspectives of the people who are expected to engage with them. In the example of the program to reduce maternal mortality, this may mean exploring whether people in the area have beliefs relating to which forms of contraception are acceptable at different ages, or who should be involved in making decisions about a pregnant person's health. As with relevance, it is best for programs to engage communities during the planning stage to understand the acceptability of the program's approaches, and it can be helpful to continue to get feedback on acceptability over the course of implementation and adapt programs accordingly.

ACCEPTABILITY: A CAVEAT

In many, if not most, cases, beliefs about acceptability are not uniformly held within the reach of a given development program, and may even impose harmful consequences for some individuals in the communities to be served. Efforts to understand acceptability do not entail an obligation to align programming with beliefs that are harmful to some, in particular to marginalized groups or people in vulnerable situations. For example, an implementer who attempts to reduce maternal mortality by increasing uptake of contraception may encounter beliefs that unmarried women should not use contraception. Honoring the principle of acceptability does not mean that the implementer should avoid all programming to make contraception available to single women; indeed, an implementer may even engage in programming to directly address stigma associated with its use. However, developing an understanding of community beliefs related to acceptability and monitoring them over time can help a program navigate implementation challenges and mitigate potential harms for program participants. In the example above, implementers should recognize that improving uptake of contraception may not be sufficient to meet the objective of reducing maternal mortality unless paired with other approaches, and they should be prepared to learn from women accessing those services whether they have experienced any negative consequences because of their participation.

QUALITY

Quality refers to how well a specific intervention approach is delivered. Concepts of quality are critical for performance monitoring; many programs include performance indicators that are based on independent measures of quality. Even with these independent measures, it can be helpful for programs to seek feedback on how quality is perceived by beneficiaries. How specific measures of quality are defined depends on the program being implemented; independent measures of quality may be based on sector-wide standards or results identified in a program's results framework or theory of change. One advantage of collecting beneficiary feedback to inform or augment quality measures is that it can provide insight into how beneficiaries themselves think about the value of the program and what it is intended to achieve. Perceptions of quality can also be used to triangulate other quality measures being used in program monitoring.

For example, a program intended to provide access to water is likely to use standard measures of water quality and safety. These measures alone will not reflect how users of the water think about quality; they may have preferences for water taste that are not directly related to standard measures of safety or quality. These preferences can affect user perceptions of the quality of the water and their willingness to use it. Beneficiary

feedback can help a program understand if user preferences are reducing utilization. It is critical to note that, as with aspects of many types of programs, beneficiary feedback cannot be used as a sole indicator of water quality or safety; drinking water can have underlying quality issues not detectable by taste or clarity. Rather, beneficiary feedback can complement and shed light on other measures. Moreover, feedback from beneficiaries can help identify other quality issues not captured directly by quality indicator data. A specific water access point may have high-quality water available, but if the area around the access point is considered unclean or unsafe, utilization of the point may be limited. These issues relate to aspects of the quality of implementation not directly addressed by the key quality indicators and can help implementers adapt their approaches to better meet the needs of water access point users.

SATISFACTION

In business and marketing, satisfaction is used as a concept for measuring customer perceptions of overall performance of a product or service, or whether that product or service met, failed, or exceeded expectations. In collecting beneficiary feedback, asking about satisfaction performs a similar function of getting an overall or holistic response to a development program. For example, a program that works with small-scale gold miners to decrease the environmental impact of gold mining might ask the miners if they were satisfied with the training and support provided by the program and if they would refer other miners to work with the program.

The holistic and imprecise nature of the concept of satisfaction is the main reason for its utility as a focus of beneficiary feedback. While beneficiaries might have negative feedback about particular aspects of the program, an overall high level of satisfaction suggests that the program is doing something right. It doesn't necessarily mean that the program is succeeding or will succeed, though.

Conversely, beneficiaries might have positive feedback on certain aspects of a program–the quality of the project staff, for example–but if overall satisfaction is low, then something about the program is probably not working well for those beneficiaries. Low measures of beneficiary satisfaction are useful alarm bells for signaling that some adaptations may be needed to achieve the program objectives. For example, if the small-scale gold miners are unsatisfied with the project's technical assistance, it is unlikely that we will see the behavioral change that is needed to decrease environmental impact. Unsatisfied beneficiaries may exit the program and discourage others from working with it, again leading to a failure to meet program objectives. Feedback that shows low satisfaction doesn't, by itself, identify what is wrong with a program, but it should prompt further exploration about why people are unsatisfied and what can be done to increase levels of satisfaction.

Measuring satisfaction may be a straightforward issue of integrating satisfaction scales into surveys or qualitative questions on satisfaction into qualitative data collection tools. When conducting surveys, implementers should consider pairing questions about satisfaction with requests for feedback on the reasons for high or low satisfaction. Low satisfaction could signal an issue with relevance rather than quality. Dissatisfaction may stem from issues that an implementer is not equipped to address. That information will be valuable in deciding whether and how to respond to dissatisfaction. If programming is intended to serve whole communities (rather than selected participants), then assessing satisfaction may require larger-scale perceptions surveys designed to be representative at the community level, which may be more appropriate to mid-term or end-line evaluations than to ongoing monitoring.

Implementers should also be aware of the potentially counterintuitive effects of interventions designed to raise awareness or expectations on an issue as part of their intervention approach. Such programs can have a seemingly negative effect on self-reported satisfaction, even when they are working as intended. For example, a

program designed to improve gender equity in access to basic education may involve raising awareness of existing inequalities. As girls participating in the program and their parents become more sensitized to the inequalities they face, they may express this awareness in decreasing satisfaction with their experience in the school. In a program that uses a community-based approach to design a small-grants program, community members may choose between a sports facility, a community center, or a new clinic. Those who wanted a clinic may be more disappointed with the community center following this process than they would have been had a new community center simply been built without community input. The potential for disappointed expectations does not mean that a community-based approach has poorer outcomes than other approaches to designing small grants; but it may appear to be if a single satisfaction measure is used to characterize its success. Implementers should ensure that they have a well-rounded approach to collecting satisfaction with different elements of programming and embrace indicators of dissatisfaction that can help improve programming.

ACCESS

Ideally, a program's approach to targeting services to potential participants will be informed by adequate preliminary assessments and seek to be as inclusive as possible within the bounds of the objectives of the program. Even with well-informed targeting, however, the practical realities of implementation and participation may entail unexpected challenges for participants that lead to unintentional exclusion or greater barriers to participation for some people than for others. Regular monitoring with confirmed participants will not, by itself, help implementers assess the accessibility of a program, which requires learning more about those who have been left out or who have elected not to participate and to explore why they have not participated.

Because it requires talking with intended but not actual beneficiaries, assessing accessibility may require an independent effort apart from regular monitoring approaches, such as an internal or external evaluation with a specific research question related to access. The respondents for such an evaluation will need to be identified from those who were eligible for a program, including those who did not participate, which in some cases may span the entire population of the communities in which programming is taking place. In this case, respondents must be selected from those who live in the area intended to benefit from the program.

Unless they are specifically designed to do so, regular monitoring efforts are unlikely to provide a clear picture of the proportion of *intended* beneficiaries who *actually* benefit from a program, or to provide a rigorous enough analysis to identify specific populations that are disproportionately left out and the degree of the discrepancy. When there is a need to quantify which groups are accessing a program's services for the purpose of establishing whether there are inequalities in the reach of a program (and their degree), a population-based survey is more likely to be necessary (and may even require oversampling of marginalized groups). Such a survey will typically require significant time and resources, and it may not provide information quickly enough to act on within the context of an ongoing program but may help improve accessibility more generally or in future programs.

Regular monitoring efforts, including obtaining feedback from intended and actual beneficiaries, can furnish information on how respondents make decisions about whether, when, and how to engage with a program and any challenges they have experienced. Respondents may share observations of challenges they think others in their communities may face or whether they think the programming is equitably accessible. An additional approach that implementers may find useful is to furnish communities with hotlines, help desks, or other unsolicited means for community members to report when they have had difficulty accessing services intended to benefit them.

UNINTENDED NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

Attention to potential harms should be assessed as part of ongoing monitoring efforts, and should include the collection of feedback from a number of stakeholders, including those intended to benefit from programming. For many programs, the approaches for monitoring potential harms will be specific to the sector and interventions. When it is reasonable to do so and does not impose an undue risk for respondents, implementers may inquire directly about potential harms. This may include screening for known risks or including open-ended questions about unintended consequences in larger-scale data collection efforts, or inquiring in greater depth about unanticipated negative consequences, as in beneficiary interviews or more structured monitoring and evaluation approaches. Interviews can directly inquire as to whether respondents have experienced or observed anything negative or harmful that is related to the programming being implemented.

When direct approaches to this line of questioning are too risky, or when the full scope of unintended harms is difficult to predict (as in a very dynamic context or a conflict-affected environment), implementers may consider passive means for beneficiaries to report their experiences, in lieu of or in addition to more direct inquiry. Risks can emerge for respondents who report harms when those harms relate to stigmatized conditions, to the presence of conflict within a community, to competition over resources among community members, or when other community members are implicated in the negative experiences of others.

OUTCOMES

USAID defines an "outcome" as a significant and intended change in the conditions of people, systems, or institutions that indicate progress or lack of progress toward the achievement of activity goals. Outcomes are a standard focus of program monitoring, but beneficiary feedback tends to have a more limited role in measuring program outcomes for beneficiaries. Many, if not most, of the outcomes tracked by activities are not perceptual in nature. For example, an intervention that expects to help beneficiaries gain employment and increase their income might ask beneficiaries about their employment status and income after the end of an intervention. While such questions may be addressed to beneficiaries, they are trying to obtain objective information, not subjective perceptions. For a training intervention, a before and after test to determine if beneficiaries learned new information is better than asking beneficiaries to self-assess the extent of their learning.

Still, some intended outcomes of an activity are subjective in nature, and obtaining beneficiary feedback may be critical to monitoring outcomes in such cases. For example, a program that supports individuals who have fled domestic violence would likely be interested in whether beneficiaries feel safer due to the intervention. In such a case, obtaining feedback from beneficiaries about their perceptions of their safety as a result of the intervention would be a key measure of the program outcomes.

Beneficiary feedback can also be useful in understanding whether and how a program intervention helped in achieving an expected outcome. For example, an intervention that expects to help youth gain employment might ask participants who were employed during the program if they thought the intervention helped them get a job and how it did or did not help. As noted in the discussion of limitations of beneficiary feedback, such feedback should be interpreted cautiously and not used to make causal inferences about the impact of the intervention on youth employment. Still, such feedback can be useful for program adaptations. For example, a participant might note that they didn't think the program intervention helped them get a job because the skills requested in interviews with potential employers were not the skills the program provided training in. Whether or not an impact evaluation of the program showed it had success in increasing the employment of participating youth, such feedback can be useful in making further improvements to the intervention.

RECOMMENDATIONS

All the topic areas of feedback addressed thus far concern the perceptions of beneficiaries about some aspect of their experience with the program intervention: whether they were satisfied with it, how relevant it was to their needs, whether it was a high-quality intervention, etc. Such questions can reveal many problems, deficiencies, or opportunities to improve the intervention.

Asking for recommendations from beneficiaries on how to address such problems or deficiencies is the next logical step in collecting feedback. All it takes is asking beneficiaries, "What would you do to improve [the intervention]?" or "What changes do you think we should make to [the intervention]?" Beneficiary recommendations can provide a rich source of ideas that may never have been considered by program designers. And, recommendations from beneficiaries needn't be representative of the beneficiary population to be useful; a single good idea about how to improve a program intervention can lead to changes that make the program better for all beneficiaries. Even when beneficiary feedback about an intervention problem seems to suggest an obvious response, recommendations from beneficiaries can inform the adaptation. For example, if participants in a training course note that they have trouble attending because it is far from public transportation routes, then it is clear that a change of location would be appropriate. Getting recommendations from beneficiaries can help narrow the list of possible alternative locations to those most likely to improve attendance.

Asking beneficiaries for recommendations can also reveal issues or deficiencies in the intervention that may not have been apparent from asking more general questions about satisfaction or other topics. For instance, beneficiaries may express lack of satisfaction with a program intervention, but without specifying the exact reasons for being dissatisfied. A recommendation by a beneficiary about what could be done to improve their satisfaction may reveal the specific issue that led to their dissatisfaction. Even when beneficiaries provide positive feedback about their experiences with an intervention, a request for recommendations can highlight issues where improvements are still possible.

Feedback from beneficiaries regarding recommendations can also include asking beneficiaries about recommendations proposed by the implementing partner or even other beneficiaries. If one beneficiary has a promising idea for a change to the program intervention, asking other beneficiaries for their feedback on it can help implementing partners get a sense of whether the recommendation has some broad appeal and might even prompt adjustments to the original recommendation or new recommendations for further improvements.

REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION

In some cases, implementers may hear over the course of collecting feedback that program participants or those living in communities where the program is operating would like more information about the program, its objectives, progress of implementation, future plans, or other issues that may affect them. Those collecting the feedback may not be in a position to provide this information in the moment, either because they do not have it or because it is sensitive. However, implementers should plan in advance for how they will document and respond to information requests in general, and should plan for providing specific information, when appropriate, following any such request.

VII. COLLECTING BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK

Most of the standard data collection approaches that are routinely used in development can be used to collect feedback from beneficiaries, with appropriate selection approaches and data collection tool design. Some approaches are designed more directly to solicit or receive feedback. We provide a review of several relevant approaches in the annex, with attention to specific ramifications of using the approach to collect feedback from those benefiting from or intended to benefit from programming. The review includes what kinds of information can best be obtained through each approach and the design considerations related to the type of information being sought.

Programs are likely to benefit most from feedback that represents respondents' perceptions or that gives them scope to share their personal experiences. Representative surveys with quantifiable response categories such as Likert scales can be used to get feedback when they inquire about respondents' perceptions about a program, its delivery, or its outcomes. However, these tend to be resource-intensive and time consuming, and may not provide feedback on critical program issues in a timely enough way to influence decision-making and adaptation. Many programs will rely, instead, on feedback emerging from qualitative data collection approaches. The type of information implementers may find useful to solicit from beneficiaries (their perceptions of relevance and quality, their experiences of issues relating to program implementation or accessibility, or their ideas for improving programs) do not necessarily require or benefit from generalizability to a broader population.

It should be noted that implementers often have access to data collected from their beneficiaries by other parties. For example, USAID may commission an external evaluation of a program, as part of which the evaluation team conducts interviews or focus group discussions with a variety of program stakeholders and participants. In some circumstances, program sites may be regularly visited by third-party monitors engaged by USAID or one of its contractors. Externally collected data will generally be made available to implementers after they have been cleaned and analyzed. Ideally, implementers (and other local stakeholders, where appropriate) will be engaged in interpreting results and working with USAID to integrate findings into programmatic decisions. These external data sources may be important to a program's overall learning; but generally do not replace efforts that implementers should be making to collect feedback from their beneficiaries.

COLLECTING AND USING FEEDBACK THROUGHOUT THE ACTIVITY LIFE CYCLE

BEFORE PROGRAMMING BEGINS

It is important to note that "feedback," as defined by this guidance, refers specifically to the experiences, perceptions, and opinions of programming provided by those who are intended to benefit from it. Feedback, according to this definition, is obtained after some programming has been delivered. However, we recognize that programming is delivered in a cycle of planning, implementing, learning, and adapting; the domains articulated here have pertinence at all stages of that cycle, and efforts to get input in the early stages lay

important groundwork for how feedback may be collected throughout implementation and influence future programming. Both USAID and its implementers routinely collect input and engage many local stakeholders before a new program is developed and in its early stages when interventions are being designed and refined. Ideally, this will also include those who represent the intended beneficiaries of a program, and input gathered at this stage may inform the questions that are asked at later stages of feedback collection.

During the inception of a program, implementers may also seek information through community consultations that inform their understanding of the acceptability of the program's specific interventions and targeting approaches. These consultations should include all those who are intended to benefit (with special attention to those who are underrepresented or marginalized). As implementers are conducting these consultations, they should take care to be clear about how the input they are gathering may or may not influence their decisions or the programming they will conduct, and they should avoid raising expectations for programming or solutions that they are not in a position to deliver.

DURING IMPLEMENTATION

While a program is being implemented, it may be useful to continue to collect feedback on the relevance of the program's interventions, even when the implementer has already committed to specific design decisions. This can help an implementer fine-tune interventions as needed, pivot (when feasible), or simply inform future iterations of similar programs.

Those designing beneficiary feedback data collection efforts should keep in mind which aspects of a program's design and its interventions are adaptable and which are not. Each program will have unique constraints, whether contractual, because of cooperative agreements between donors, implementing partners, or government partners, because of locally applicable laws and regulations, or because of resource availability. When information about the relevance of interventions is not actionable (as at the end of a program, or when existing agreements make adapting the interventions difficult), partners may not wish to raise expectations for change or for additional programming that cannot be satisfied. First, because doing so may damage the implementer's relationships in the communities where they work. Second, because implementers bear a duty to those from whom they collect information to ensure that the time and effort they spend is for a clear purpose and use.

Implementers should be prepared, over the course of implementation, to adapt their plans for collecting feedback, including which beneficiaries (or intended beneficiaries) they seek feedback from and what data collection methods and tools they use to collect feedback. Feedback is often critical for explaining and understanding results of other monitoring approaches. For example, an implementer may observe that training completion rates among women are consistently lower in one community than in others. Monitoring data alone cannot tell them what the issue is. The data collection approach and tools that will help the implementer understand the barriers faced by women in that community should be designed specifically to provide insight into the challenge surfaced from the monitoring issue. Only by talking directly with the women who participated in the training in that community can program staff learn, for example, that the bathroom facilities were inadequate, that the walk home was too poorly lit, or that the instructor evidenced gender bias in his instruction. Each of these challenges implies a very different type of adaptation if the implementer wishes to improve gender parity in completion of the training in that community (by relocating the training, scheduling it at a different time, or finding a new instructor or providing training to the existing instructor).

AFTER IMPLEMENTATION

At midpoint or end-line, implementers may conduct small- or large-scale evaluative activities to understand how relevant the main interventions were for addressing concerns and/or how acceptable intervention

approaches have been. Feedback about either the success or failure of intervention approaches in addressing concerns or about changes in the needs or priorities of those intended to benefit from programming may be useful in the design of follow-on activities. At endline, implementers are unable to respond to feedback by adapting a program; information at this stage will be useful for future programming, including any planned follow-on activities, but care should be taken not to raise expectations about future programs that might not be met.

Mid-term and end-line feedback collection efforts can also be used to assess quality and help in understanding a program's effectiveness in achieving outcomes. At mid-term, feedback on quality can inform adaptations to interventions, at end-line, feedback on quality may be used to inform the design of follow-on or other future programming.

ADDRESSING INCLUSION IN DATA COLLECTION

Inclusive development is the concept that every person, regardless of identity, is instrumental in the transformation of their own societies and their inclusion throughout the development process leads to better outcomes.[16] USAID policy prohibits discrimination and supports inclusive development.[17] Collecting feedback from intended beneficiaries can help implementers understand when they are encountering barriers to accessing programming or in realizing the full benefits of programming. Collecting data from certain groups can pose challenges in some circumstances, however. This can occur when underrepresented groups are geographically or technologically more difficult to contact, or when issues relating to stigma and safety put them at risk as a result of the data collection exercise. Implementers must weigh the risks to intended beneficiaries against the potential advantages of soliciting their feedback, and should consider data collection approaches that mitigate the risks. Ensuring nondiscrimination should be a high priority of any USAID implementing partner; however, when collecting data from underrepresented groups poses undue risks, partners should weigh alternatives. Documentation of the reasons for choices about how and from whom to collect feedback can help partners share their and their beneficiaries' concerns and risks.

ENSURING THAT DATA COLLECTION METHODS ARE SAFE, ACCESSIBLE, AND CONFIDENTIAL

As with any data regarding beneficiaries, implementing partners should ensure that beneficiary feedback is collected and used responsibly to ensure the safety and protection of beneficiaries. How to safely collect and best protect information depends on the nature of programming and the data collection approaches, but implementers should plan for safe and responsible data management in advance of soliciting feedback.[18] What constitutes safe data collection methods also depends on the beneficiaries from whom feedback is sought. As noted, some populations may encounter stigmatization or other vulnerabilities due to data collection efforts. In other cases, such as when soliciting feedback from children, getting additional permissions (e.g. from institutional review boards, local authorities, government oversight authorities, as well as consent from parents or guardians) may be necessary.

Beneficiary feedback may not be collected through coercion. Implementing partners must not withhold benefits to those otherwise eligible for benefits based on whether a beneficiary provides feedback or on

16 See Promoting Nondiscrimination and Inclusive Development in USAID-Funded Programs.

17 Nondiscrimination for Beneficiaries and Suggested Approaches for Integrating Inclusive Development Across the Program Cycle and in Mission Operations.

18 See Considerations for Using Data Responsibly at USAID. USAID, U.S. Global Development Lab.

the nature of the feedback about the benefits received. Even when feedback is voluntary, it is important to recognize that it may not be risk-free for those providing it. As with any data collection effort, implementers should assess each question for whether a response could put the person providing it at risk. In some cases, information may be sensitive in ways implementers don't fully understand. For example, individuals may be put at risk for sharing critical perspectives or negative perceptions of a program that benefits power-holders in a community. Implementers can identify issues with data collection tools by validating them in advance with a small group of those likely to understand the potential vulnerabilities of program beneficiaries.

It is especially important for implementers to remember that even de-identified data may be difficult to fully safeguard. In some cases, individual identities can be reconstructed from demographic and other details provided. Implementers should exercise caution and may benefit from asking beneficiaries directly if they consider the information they are providing to be sensitive. They may also need to explore which technological safeguards may be appropriate for their data-collection approach; some tablet- and smartphone-based data collection tools include kill switches and other features that protect information in the event that they are confiscated. In other cases, password protection and other access controls may be sufficient.

VIII. RESPONDING TO BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK

Feedback from those who participate in or are affected by programming is critical to good management. However, as with any data-collection effort, implementers of feedback-collection exercises bear a duty to potential respondents to ensure that the information being collected has a clear utility to the implementer and to current or future beneficiaries. Implementers may not be able to respond to every piece of feedback received, but should design their data-collection efforts with utilization in mind.

To ensure the use of feedback they have collected, implementers may benefit from planning in advance for how they will respond to the various kinds of feedback they intend to collect or that they anticipate receiving throughout implementation. For example, implementers may identify categories of feedback, and for each category, set an expectation for when and how they will acknowledge the feedback, integrate it into program implementation, and close the loop by reporting back to the community that provided it and to USAID. This type of plan can provide guidelines for responses and establish clear expectations with communities where programming is taking place. It will also prompt implementers to think in advance about how they may respond to difficult feedback, feedback that is critical of programming, or feedback that indicates a critical situation involving fraud, waste, or abuse or sensitive protection issues and be prepared with a plan to respond quickly to these situations.

INCORPORATING BENEFICIARY FEEDBACK INFORMATION INTO ACTIVITY DECISION-MAKING

USAID asks implementers to not only collect and analyze beneficiary feedback, but also to respond to it. At the very least, this means regularly reviewing what has been learned from analysis of beneficiary feedback and incorporating it (along with other information) into management decision-making. When beneficiary feedback provides actionable insights for program improvement, implementers should endeavor to "close the feedback loop" by taking actions in response to feedback received, and to document these adaptations. If such changes would require modifications to contracts or awards, implementers should meet with USAID to discuss how such changes could potentially make the activity more responsive to beneficiaries and improve development outcomes and ensure that the adaptations are feasible within the constraints of their award or contract. In some cases, implementers may need to navigate feedback that conflicts with their obligations to USAID. For example, implementers who are bound (for example, by their contract) to a specific results framework and associated indicators may not be in a position to execute certain pivots to their programming, despite feedback in support of such a pivot. Implementers should work with USAID counterparts to fully understand what is feasible.

Implementers may also encounter feedback from individuals or groups that do not concur with one another on what the activity's priorities should be, and they should be prepared to respond to these issues if they arise and (if warranted) address them as part of a conflict sensitivity or mitigation plan. For especially sensitive issues, an implementer may be justified in collecting only limited feedback on issues with the potential to spark disagreement or conflict.

REPORTING BACK TO BENEFICIARIES

When implementers can adapt programming to better meet beneficiary needs, they may wish to find additional ways to communicate these adaptations back to those who provided feedback and with the broader group of beneficiaries of that program. Doing so will demonstrate the utility of the feedback provided and the time beneficiaries committed to providing it, as well as the commitment of the implementer to partner with local communities and respond to the needs and concerns of those intended to benefit.

The act of listening to beneficiaries and collecting their feedback can be a powerful means of building trust and respecting the inherent dignity of beneficiaries. This may be further enhanced by sharing back to them how the feedback they provided has been used and what has been learned from it. When coupled with an explanation of what the program is doing in response to what has been learned, sharing back to beneficiaries can demonstrate an implementer's commitment to integrating feedback into their programmatic decisions and strengthen the relationship between implementing partners and beneficiaries.

Unlike the collection of feedback data, though, responding *directly to individual beneficiaries* about what has been learned from beneficiary feedback may not be the most feasible or the most useful means of responding to beneficiaries. Depending on the activity, stakeholder groups, particularly those that represent beneficiaries, may be a more effective means of sharing what has been learned from beneficiary feedback and how the program will respond. Ultimately, demonstrating to beneficiaries that their feedback has been heard is best served by making legible changes to program implementation in ways that address shortcomings voiced by beneficiaries.

ADDRESSING CRITICAL OR SENSITIVE ISSUES

Implementers should be prepared to receive unexpected or negative information from beneficiaries, whether from active or passive approaches to collecting feedback. In some cases, this information may relate to critical protection issues affecting beneficiaries. This information may or may not relate to or be sufficient to determine whether the issue is a result of the programming or related to anybody involved in it. Implementers should plan ahead for how they will respond to any of these cases so they can take swift action to protect individuals if the need arises or so they can connect reporters with services.

If, during the collection of beneficiary feedback, an implementing partner receives information regarding an allegation of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), the implementing partners should consult their award requirements to determine how best to report SEA allegations. As described in the Action Alliance for Preventing Sexual Misconduct (AAPSM) Partner's Toolkit,[19] USAID encourages implementing partners to closely consult with the cognizant AO/CO and Mission Director regarding any credible allegations of SEA, and report allegations to the USAID Office of Inspector General (OIG).

It may occur that, while collecting feedback, implementers receive information relating to other adverse social impacts, such as environmental risks, gender discrimination, or trafficking in persons. In such cases, implementers may have particular duties to respond, both for the safety of those affected by programming and as a result of award-specific requirements. USAID implementing partners should, again, work closely with the cognizant AO/CO to resolve the issue swiftly. Implementers may find it helpful to create a plan at the time of activity start-up for how they will respond to these kinds of issues, if they emerge, so that they clearly understand their obligations and can be prepared to take swift action, even when that action is to alert other duty-bearers to the needs at hand.

19 *AAPSM Partners Toolkit*. USAID, 6 Oct. 2021.

If feedback from program beneficiaries includes allegations of fraud, waste, or abuse, implementers must comply with mandatory disclosure requirements as stipulated in award documents and by agency policy; employees of organizations as well as beneficiaries themselves may report issues to the Officer of the Inspector General's hotline.

REPORTING TO FUNDERS (USAID)

USAID implementing partners should report to USAID regarding the beneficiary feedback they have collected or received and how they have responded to it. The specific instructions for doing so may be defined in the activity agreement between USAID and the implementing partner. In lieu of such instructions or as a complement to such instructions, plans for collecting and reporting on feedback should be articulated in the implementing partner's Activity MEL Plan. This should include the implementer's plans for how to safely manage data provided by beneficiaries and report it to USAID.

An implementing partner has many ways to report to USAID on beneficiary feedback. For most implementing partners, reports on feedback from beneficiaries will be included in their regular progress reports that are provided to USAID on a quarterly, semi-annual, or annual basis. It is generally not necessary or appropriate to report all feedback received verbatim to USAID, unless requested as part of the award agreement. The identities of individual beneficiaries providing feedback should not be reported with their feedback in order to protect their privacy, and even de-identified verbatim responses risk exposing the identity of beneficiaries. Rather, it is typically more appropriate for implementing partners to report a summary or an analysis of beneficiary feedback received, along with a description of actions taken in response to feedback.

In some instances, an implementing partner may be required by their award or may choose to collect regular systematic feedback from beneficiaries in a way that can be quantified as a performance indicator. In such cases, the performance indicator should be included in the implementing partner's monitoring plan and accompanied by a performance indicator reference sheet. Disaggregation by gender is required of all person-level performance indicators, when possible. Other relevant disaggregations, such as by age, location, or disability status, may be required by the implementing partner's contract or agreement or encouraged by the activity AOR or COR. In some cases, though, protecting the privacy of beneficiaries or vulnerabilities related to beneficiary characteristics may limit the extent to which those characteristics should be collected or the extent to which beneficiary feedback data should be disaggregated by such characteristics in reporting.

If an implementing partner is collecting beneficiary feedback as part of a large-scale survey or other high value data collection effort, then such data would also be subject to requirements for uploading the appropriate dataset to the Development Data Library. Visit the USAID Development Data Library webpage for further information.

IX. CONCLUSION

This document seeks to introduce beneficiary feedback collection as a key practice in the implementation of USAID development activities. It is not intended as a source of policy or legal requirements for USAID implementing partners. As in other areas, implementing partners should refer to their contract or agreement and turn to their contract or agreement officers or their representatives for specific questions related to their contract.

Rather, this document is intended to spark ideas and conversation for integrating and elevating beneficiary feedback in USAID development activities. As USAID and its implementing partners make progress toward localizing aid and centering local individuals and communities as equal partners in development, a commitment to collecting and responding to feedback from beneficiaries will be a critical component to success.

ANNEX A. DATA COLLECTION APPROACHES

This annex describes eight broad categories of approaches for collecting beneficiary feedback. They include both quantitative and qualitative approaches. They range from systematic and intensive methods of actively collecting feedback, such as representative surveys, to more informal and passive methods, such as comment boxes. This list is not intended to be comprehensive; feedback may be collected via a wide range of possible approaches both formal and informal. This list is also not mutually exclusive; the approaches may be used in combination based on what is the best fit for the size, complexity, and purpose of the development program. Finally, none of these particular categories of approaches are required of USAID implementing partners unless specified as such in the implementing partner's contract or agreement.

Beneficiary Interviews

Interviews are an accessible tool for getting input from beneficiaries or intended beneficiaries of a program. In-depth interviews are qualitative data collection approaches that use semi-structured interview protocols. They can be designed to develop a deep understanding of a set of problems or issues that a respondent confronts, or of a respondent's engagement with a program or the ways it has affected their life or experience. In-depth interviews are distinct from key informant interviews, in that key informants tend to be those who have participated in some way in the implementation of a program. They are typically part of a specific stakeholder group, such as local authorities, implementing partner staff, civil society, etc. Interview guides for key informant interviews are often designed to understand how a program was implemented, what challenges were encountered, and what could have been improved. Key informant interviews can be conducted with beneficiaries, but most key informant interviews will not, by themselves, constitute beneficiary feedback.

WHEN TO USE BENEFICIARY INTERVIEWS

Use this approach when you want to understand how people feel about the programs they engage in and why, what their experience has been like, and how it has affected aspects of their lived experience. These interviews can be used at inception to inform the design of a program and ensure its relevance, early in a program to inform decisions about specific interventions and their targeting and implementation, or at the end of a program to explore expected and unanticipated outcomes, both positive and negative. These interviews can also be used to get in-depth information on circumstances that may uniquely affect vulnerable populations and as part of monitoring for and mitigating potential harms.

LIMITATIONS

In-depth interviews are not designed to provide quantifiable results or to be generalized to a population. These interviews may require substantial time commitments for data collectors as well as for interviewees; it is important to ensure that the information being collected has a clear purpose and the questions are well-crafted and linked to broader learning intentions.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONDUCTING BENEFICIARY INTERVIEWS

The approaches used to select respondents for beneficiary interviews determine how the information should be used; as a qualitative method, selection of respondents does not need to be designed to achieve the generalizability often demanded for quantitative surveys. However, the selection of respondents will determine whose experiences are represented and who has an opportunity to influence programmatic decisions. Care should be taken in selecting respondents for interviews to reflect the diversity of communities affected by programming.

Protocols for in-depth interviews should be tailored to the respondent and the type of information being sought. Because the interviews are qualitative and may be time-consuming, it is less important to ensure consistency across interviews in the questions being asked than would be the case for a survey, and more important to ensure that the questions being asked of any respondent are relevant to their experience and useful for the program. As with any interview protocol, those collecting data should validate the questions being asked, including in any languages to which they are translated, to ensure that the data collection tool reflects what it is intended to.

Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions are group interviews, typically of a specific demographic profile (for example, by gender and age category). They help researchers understand the unique considerations and perspectives of that demographic group, in general and relative to other groups. They are advantageous in that they can provide multiple perspectives in a single interview session, and the perspectives shared allow participants to build on or respond to one another's thoughts.

WHEN TO USE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Focus group discussions are useful any time an implementer wants to understand the perspectives of one or more specific groups of people who share some set of characteristics. For example, an implementer may use focus groups based on age and gender to solicit feedback on aspects of a program that relate to each group's unique experiences. Findings from focus group discussions are improved by the discussions among participants, which help the respondents to gain new perspectives themselves, understand one another's experiences, and elaborate on themes in ways they might not in individual interviews. As an approach for soliciting feedback from beneficiaries, focus group discussions can surface experiences shared by beneficiaries and explore the predominating views of that group. They are less well suited to documenting and learning from individual experiences.

LIMITATIONS

In focus group discussions, as in any group interview setting, some voices can dominate others. It is important for those observing the discussions and taking notes to document what they witness in the discussion, including aspects of body language and tone if relevant, that allow findings to be carefully interpreted based on whether any participants have dominated the discussion and the degree to which other perspectives may have been silenced or discouraged. Focus group discussions are designed to identify predominating views; they are not the best choice if the objective is to understand the diversity of different perspectives or to identify minority or outlying opinions. They do not allow for documentation of the proportion of a population that espouses a perspective.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Focus group discussions should be conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol, with a set of open-ended questions and some flexibility to pursue interesting avenues that emerge from the discussion as it unfolds. Those guiding the discussion should therefore have a clear understanding of how the findings from the discussions will be used so they can consider this when following or redirecting the conversation of participants.

In most cases, focus group discussions require multiple people to facilitate them, including at least one person to guide the discussion and one to two additional people to take notes. Discussions may be recorded so that responses can be fully documented and further explored after the fact to verify precise meaning, either with or without transcripts and systematic textual analysis. If resources don't allow for recording and transcription (and translation if needed), or if sensitivities make recording undesirable, then additional investment in robust notetaking is advised. Even if recordings are made, notetakers can capture themes as they emerge and can document the group dynamics, which may be important for contextualizing findings.

Representative Surveys

Representative surveys are typically large-scale data collection exercises that aim to generalize findings from the sample of respondents to a broader population. When used to get feedback from beneficiaries, this can be done to measure the prevalence of a particular experience, perception, or perspective in a population served by a program, or to assess what proportion of a population has access to or has benefited from a program or its services or a change in access or outcomes. Surveys cannot give in-depth information about any respondents' experiences or concerns, but they can be a tool for understanding the degree to which a population is affected by a set of issues or benefiting from a program, or to identify subpopulations that may not be accessing services or other benefits intended to reach them.

Note that there are two major types of surveys. Population-based surveys involve sampling from a broad population, typically a geographically bounded area such as a whole district or even a country. When sampling is done correctly, these surveys allow findings to be generalized to the broader population. These surveys can be used to assess what proportion of that population has knowledge of a program or has accessed services or experienced benefits.

In other cases, a survey may be collected from a sample (or census)[20] of those who have been recorded as participating in a program. These surveys are often similar in scope, length, and design to population-based surveys, but with the key difference that findings can be generalized to the population from which the sample was collected. If the respondents are sampled from the population of confirmed beneficiaries, then the findings can be generalized only to them. This will allow for quantification of outcomes, attributes, or perceptions among confirmed beneficiaries, but not for assessing accessibility of program benefits or information about all those who live in communities intended to benefit from a program.

20 In this case, census refers to an approach to data collection in which a response is solicited from every eligible party. For example, if a program has engaged with 500 farmers, a data collection exercise could include either a census (all 500 farmers) or a sample (some portion of those farmers, e.g., 100).

WHEN TO USE REPRESENTATIVE SURVEYS

Representative surveys are the best tool to use when it is critical to quantify something related to the program at the level of an entire population with a predictable degree of precision. Representative surveys typically require an intensive data collection effort and may require significant resources and time to conduct; they do not furnish results quickly. They are more likely to be used to establish a baseline or as part of a program evaluation than as part of regular monitoring. Because of this, surveys are rarely the only means of getting feedback from beneficiaries; nor would beneficiary feedback typically be the sole purpose for conducting a large-scale survey. However, a survey conducted as part of an evaluation or other ongoing data collection effort may provide a unique opportunity to collect generalizable perceptions or satisfaction data from a population that would be difficult to obtain through other means.

LIMITATIONS

Most representative surveys are large in scale. The sample size required for a representative survey depends on the population being represented and on several other aspects of the survey design and the data being collected, but samples for representative surveys are typically large. Survey teams may need several months to design and validate a survey tool and collect and analyze data. This type of survey would not be suitable when information is needed to guide urgent decisions about a program. Large-scale surveys are typically more costly than some other approaches and should be reserved for when quantification at the population level is critical or when testing hypotheses about a program that require inferential statistical techniques to answer adequately, as in experimental and quasi experimental evaluation designs.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONDUCTING REPRESENTATIVE SURVEYS

Representative surveys, particularly population-based ones, require carefully designed sampling approaches to ensure that the constraints on generalizability allow for the key questions to be answered, particularly if they include questions of accessibility. Surveys often require significant time and resources to conduct; ideally they will be planned early in the implementation of an activity so that sufficient time can be invested in developing and validating the survey tool and collecting data.

Questionnaires and Non-Representative Surveys

Questionnaires and other (usually short) non-representative surveys allow for implementers to collect feedback quickly and from a diverse set of respondents. They can cover any of a variety of topics, but are best used to get information that can be captured in multiple choice and/or short answer questions. They can be carried out in person, with an interviewer, on paper, online, or by phone, SMS, or app. Note that questionnaires and non-representative short surveys are distinct from the large-scale, representative surveys described above, which are typically longer in form, larger in scale, and designed to be generalizable to an overall population when used in the monitoring or evaluation of development programming. Questionnaires can be used in a variety of applications and need not be representative to be useful. They can help identify examples or cases of interest or to take a quick pulse on an issue, but not to quantify the prevalence of a specific experience or opinion as a larger scale perceptions survey would.

WHEN TO USE QUESTIONNAIRES AND NON-REPRESENTATIVE SURVEYS

Questionnaires are useful because they are typically quick and easy to collect. They are suitable when a snapshot of perspectives is needed, for example at the point of service. A common application of this approach is the evaluation of trainings or events completed by participants before they leave, or by those who have just used a service such as a clinic. They may be similar in design to approaches often used for getting customer feedback.

LIMITATIONS

Questionnaires are not ideal when in-depth answers are required or to communicate about complex topics with respondents. They are used to collect multiple choice, either/or, Likert scale, ranking, or short-answer data. The approach used to identify respondents will have a direct influence on how data can be interpreted and used. In most cases, questionnaires are not collected in a way that allows the data to be generalized, which limits the aggregation of responses to descriptive summaries (rather than inferential statistics for establishing point estimates and hypothesis testing, as are possible in representative surveys).

CONSIDERATIONS FOR USING QUESTIONNAIRES AND NON-REPRESENTATIVE SURVEYS

Those developing questionnaires or short surveys should attend to the design of questions, ensuring they are kept simple and address clear single concepts that are easy for respondents to understand. The time required to complete questionnaires is typically much shorter than in other methods for collecting feedback, and care should be taken to fit the length of the questionnaires within what is reasonable for respondents, who may be asked to participate as they are leaving an event or service point.

One strength of questionnaires is that they can be administered in a variety of ways. The mode of administration should be suited to the population from whom feedback is being sought and any barriers or limitations that might affect their participation. Any mode of data collection has the potential to constrain who can easily participate, and introduce bias into the responses as a result. Bias can never be completely eliminated, but should be acknowledged so that findings can be appropriately interpreted.

CASE STUDY:

LEARNING FROM A CONSTITUENT SATISFACTION SURVEY IN CAMBODIA

This 2017 CLA Case Competition submission describes how the Civil Society Innovations program in Cambodia deployed rapid-demand surveys of the program's constituents, enabled by information and communication technologies, to rapidly refine their program for better results. The program's implementer, DAI Global, worked with partner civil society organizations (CSOs) to leverage technologies to hear directly from their constituents, and integrate rapid feedback into standard practices.

Hotlines and Comment Boxes

For some kinds of programs, it is critical to allow feedback to be shared anonymously, and if need be, urgently. Hotlines allow beneficiaries and other stakeholders to safely report waste, fraud, abuse, security issues, and other problems for further investigation. Hotlines can also be set up to provide support to those having difficulty accessing a program or its services, or to provide general information. Comment boxes allow beneficiaries to share feedback easily and anonymously.

WHEN TO USE HOTLINES AND COMMENT BOXES

Hotlines can be used for almost any kind of program, but may be especially useful for those operating in sensitive areas or on sensitive issues, to reduce the risk of reprisal for beneficiaries who report problems they observe. They can also be useful when technical assistance can be provided to beneficiaries through phone consultations. Hotlines may take multiple forms; though a dedicated phone line is typical, a similar function can be set up using internet-based platforms. Comment boxes can be placed strategically near implementation sites. It may not be possible to completely secure a comment box, but they are accessible and generally allow for anonymous contribution. The exception to this is if they are infrequently used and are under direct observation.

LIMITATIONS

Hotlines are limited by the technology used to support them, and may unintentionally exclude some individuals or present them with greater difficulties in accessing support if they do not have access to a phone or the internet. In some cases, individuals have access to a telephone or internet, but do not have the ability to use them privately, which may create an appearance of access without guaranteeing safe access. Implementers that use hotlines must also ensure they are appropriately staffed with people trained to respond to the issues that may arise and that support or responses can be provided quickly and safely.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR USING HOTLINES AND COMMENT BOXES

Since hotlines and comment boxes have the primary purpose of gathering information on issues beneficiaries may be experiencing, it is critical to ensure that programs have the capacity to respond quickly to information shared in this way. Programs will also need to think carefully about whether and how to collect contact information from those calling into the hotline, or providing comments into the comment box, weighing the need to respond to individual issues against the need to protect the identities of individuals sharing potentially damaging information in the case of fraud, waste, abuse, or other behaviors that conflict with USAID policies. Staff responding to hotlines and comment boxes must be equipped to address individuals who may have experienced trauma, particularly in areas affected by conflict. Implementers may find it helpful to include relevant phone numbers, internet links, email addresses, or physical addresses in communications materials so that beneficiaries will be aware of the options available for providing feedback.

Online Help Desks and Other Online Feedback

For many kinds of programs, it can be beneficial to provide a means of sharing feedback that is accessible to anyone who wishes to provide it (compared with methods in which researchers select respondents for participation in data collection exercises and directly solicit feedback). Similar to customer support for retail services, help desks and feedback forms can both be useful tools for hearing from beneficiaries. These approaches will surface specific incidences of issues and, depending on their design, can offer an opportunity for direct resolution.

WHEN TO USE ONLINE FEEDBACK

Online support through help desks is ideal when beneficiaries may need technical assistance in contacting program representatives or when accessing benefits or services. Help desks can provide support quickly. Online feedback forms ensure that opportunities to provide feedback are broadly available and can supplement other approaches for getting feedback.

LIMITATIONS

Online feedback ensures that opportunities for feedback are broadly available, but in areas where access to internet services is inequitable or costly, it could entail unintended differences among beneficiaries in ability to provide feedback or access help. In such cases, online approaches can still be suitable, but alternatives should also be made available. Since anyone can submit any feedback, programs should ensure they have some means to validate information they receive, particularly if information is provided about problematic issues or experiences, such as inappropriate behavior by anyone affiliated with the program, while remaining sensitive to the need to preserve confidentiality when feasible. In some cases, ensuring confidentiality may not be feasible, and this should be clearly communicated to those using online feedback mechanisms.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR COLLECTING FEEDBACK ONLINE

If setting up a help desk, implementers must ensure they have the capacity to respond in a timely way to requests for support or questions about a program. Other forms of online support may not require responsiveness, other than following up on any critical issues that have been shared. As with hotlines and comment boxes, implementers may find it helpful to include relevant phone numbers, internet links, or email addresses in communications materials so beneficiaries will be aware of the options available for providing feedback.

Social Media

Development programs increasingly have some kind of presence on social media platforms, which provide opportunities for feedback from diverse audiences. Feedback can be mined from comments that individuals make on updates shared by programs and their implementers or other stakeholders. This type of feedback is typically shared organically but can be useful to implementers. In some cases, a program may solicit feedback on specific questions using social media platforms, for example, posing discussion questions for followers.

WHEN TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR FEEDBACK

Wherever a significant proportion of intended program beneficiaries are regular users of social media, these platforms can be used to allow them to engage directly with program implementers. Platforms can be structured to allow for feedback to be volunteered as well as dialogue or other direct interaction between users and implementers.

LIMITATIONS

It may be difficult for program implementers to confirm that users of social media platforms who are responding to posts are legitimately intended or actual beneficiaries of the program; some platforms allow for groups with restricted registration, but imposing such restrictions could limit voluntary engagement. When using social media platforms, programs cannot guarantee the confidentiality of any feedback provided, and if they solicit feedback on sensitive issues, it could inadvertently harm those providing it, particularly if any community stakeholders have incentive to limit negative feedback. As with other online approaches, social media will be more accessible to those with robust access to affordableinternet services. Social media users may also skew toward or away from some demographic profiles, depending on the location and platform.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR COLLECTING FEEDBACK THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is likely to be most effective when part of an overall communications strategy of a program and when the program has established a robust social media presence. A program should decide whether to use social media passively, monitoring engagements for issues that require further validation or follow up, or whether to use it actively, by posing questions or otherwise promoting interactions that may be helpful in decision making by implementers.

Community Score Cards

Community Score Cards are a participatory monitoring tool in which communities are directly engaged in developing the rubrics by which service providers will be assessed, based on the characteristics they find most important, and in scoring the services over time. In most cases, Community Score Cards also involve communities in action-planning to realize incremental improvements in the program and its implementation. They are a tool for integrating feedback directly into the implementation approach.

WHEN TO USE COMMUNITY SCORE CARDS

Community Score Cards are most often used for programs that involve the provision of public services, and they provide a tool to ensure the accountability of public service providers to the communities they serve. They depend on public service providers' willingness to hear feedback and ability to commit to participatory action planning and can only be undertaken when public service providers have flexibility in how they provide services and embrace the participatory approach. They can be particularly helpful when a program may benefit from building a more in-depth understanding among community members of the constraints they face in providing services and in addressing community complaints, and when engaging community members in the problem solving process can result not only in the potential for innovation, but also in community buy in to the program's success and in setting clear expectations for what can be improved and what may be more limited.

LIMITATIONS

Community Score Cards are an intensive process that must be committed to from the beginning of an activity because they are integral to implementation. They form the basis of the monitoring system for any activity that uses them; this does not preclude collection of some additional data, such as required indicators, but may limit opportunities for the use of other intensive monitoring approaches. Even with the agreement of public officials to use the approach, feedback sessions (typically called "interface meetings") can feel threatening to service providers, especially to specific individuals whose professional performance may be under scrutiny as a result of the Score Card approach.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR USING COMMUNITY SCORE CARDS

Community Score Cards are typically identified at the outset of a program to be used as a key part of the program's implementation. Program staff begin by helping both community members and service providers establish the criteria by which services will be assessed, usually across a set of domains. The resulting rubrics are used to allow communities to periodically score service providers as well as for service providers to conduct self assessments. These are used as the basis for interface meetings, in which communities share their assessments and service providers respond, and facilitators help them arrive at possible solutions to challenges that have been surfaced from the assessment process. These solutions are integrated into the implementation plan for the next period. These processes are documented and shared openly with communities to ensure further accountability to the solutions agreed upon.

CASE STUDY:

ZIMBABWE HEALTH PROGRAM CLOSES FEEDBACK LOOPS BY IMPROVING DATA USE FROM COMMUNITY SCORE CARDS

In Zimbabwe, local Health Center Committees and District Health Executive teams are using Community Score Card data to understand major health challenges facing local communities and are taking action to reduce barriers to care. This 2017 CLA Case Competition submission describes the experience of the Advancing Partners & Communities Local Capacity Initiative (APC/LCI) in improving the visualization and use of score-card data, strengthening the feedback loop, and fostering a culture shift toward adaptive management and data use.

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U.S. Agency for International Development
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20523
www.usaid.gov