10 tips to analyse feedback from your primary constituents

Resilient Roots: conquering the feedback loop - Part 3 of 5: “Analysis”

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In the Resilient Roots initiative, 14 organisations from all over the world are running pilot projects to test new primary constituent accountability mechanisms. In most cases, these mechanisms focus on collecting and using feedback from the key constituents of each organisation.

Feedback is an important element of improving accountability, and for this process to be meaningful, feedback mechanisms must include all 5 stages of a closed feedback loop. You can read more about primary constituent accountability in this blog post, and learn about “closing feedback loops” in this 2 minute video.

In this blog series, we want to highlight some key considerations for every stage of the feedback loop, share solutions to common challenges and simple tips that can help you harness feedback to improve primary constituent accountability. To illustrate this process, we are using examples and learnings from Resilient Roots pilot projects.

Are you ready now? Then let’s get started!

In the first blog post of this series we shared 10 steps to design your accountability feedback mechanism. In the second blog post, you learned more about how to collect feedback in an accountable way and make these efforts fit for purpose. Now, you should have a lot of qualitative and quantitative data about the needs, opinions, complaints and wishes of your primary constituents. If you don’t, you should go back to our second post and check whether your collection method was fit for purpose.

If collecting feedback from your constituents went well, you will now have information that can give you practical guidance on how to strengthen your work and build stronger relationships with those who matter the most to your organisation - the people whose lives are affected by your work.

In this post we will share common challenges you may encounter when **analysing the feedback** you collect, some tips for making this process more valuable and thorough, and help you check your assumptions about what your primary constituents want from you.

However, we first want to share a word of caution! Sometimes analysing feedback can be a very time consuming (or even tedious) exercise. You may not have enough capacity to analyse in detail every single comment or question you receive, but the good news is an in-depth analysis is not always necessary! Your analysis should involve determining the value and relevance of the feedback you have collected, according to priority areas of focus and where you are able to make changes and improvements. **This should not be confused**

with shying away from or disregarding difficult feedback, and instead entails being strategic about where you invest your time and resources. The reason for collecting feedback differs across organisations and should influence how to analyse your feedback.

1. Mitigate for your own biases and blindspots

Just like all human beings, you probably will have some assumptions and expectations about the feedback you have collected. The way we look at and interpret data carries our own biases and blindspots. It is important to leave these assumptions behind and try to look at what people say with an open mind. Applying some of these suggestions from Resilient Roots partners can also help you mitigate biases at the analysis stage.

For example, Educo Nicaragua, a children's rights organisation, always applies their "Step Back" methodology before starting any feedback analysis. This entails interpreting results with an attitude of "not knowing" in the process, recognising that the only expert in a situation are their primary constituents, or those most affected by a certain issue. This helps them avoid getting defensive or taking feedback personally, and instead creates a more learning-oriented scenario.

Another strategy is to involve a group of your staff when analysing feedback, instead of leaving the interpretation up to only one individual. To this end, Climate Watch Thailand (CWT) created an internal working group on accountability, responsible for processing and analysing feedback, among other things. They also made the team as diverse as possible, including operations staff or communications officers in addition to programmatic staff.

2. Structure the feedback received by how quickly and who can respond to it

Datasets can be quite overwhelming, and as we mentioned above, it is important to approach data analysis in a structured way, so you don't miss any information and maximise your learnings. Depending on the capacities and resources available, you might begin by asking yourself the following questions:

- What are some preliminary findings of what the data seems to indicate?
- Can the data be organised by theme to facilitate the analysis?
- Or maybe by relevance to your organisation's work?
- Could it be easier to organise data based on the turnaround time you will need to implement related changes?

An easy way to start, used by some Resilient Roots partners, is to divide the feedback into things that can be addressed more easily or quickly, and pieces of feedback that require more long term strategic considerations and discussions with your organisation about how you carry out your work.

Data analysis can be done in a number of ways and using a series of tools. Sometimes advanced statistical software may be handy, but more often than not, feedback can be easily analysed using accessible tools commonly found in most computers. For example, Project Jeune Leader (PJL), an organisation providing sexual health education to young students in Madagascar, transcribes all feedback received into an Excel file. The person transcribing the data then categorises the feedback based on whether the programme team can quickly address it independently, or whether it is something that requires further discussion, including with senior management. This also allows them to strengthen the decision-making power of their programme staff and establishes a mechanism that ensures quick processes for quick fixes.

3. Segment the feedback by your primary constituents sub-groups to make sense of it

You may have more than one distinct primary constituent group: they could be young or elderly people, people who identify as men, women or non-binary, people with disabilities, or from specific areas or regions, etc. To be able to put your feedback into context, it can be important to cluster it based on your different primary constituent groups, keep their specific characteristics in mind. It is likely that different groups have different experiences with your organisation, and therefore will have different things to say about your work - and quite often this feedback may even be contradictory.

For example, CWT categorises its primary constituents into three distinct constituent groups: farmers, communities impacted by climate change, and women. They also roll out different initiatives with different groups of constituents, such as with farmers they actively work with on how climate change impacts agriculture. They also apply a special gender lens to their work to understand how women are particularly affected by environmental issues. Because their programming varies considerably among constituent groups, segmenting feedback has allowed CWT to better identify the specific needs of their different constituencies, develop more targeted programming based on their experiences, and altogether improve their relationship with them.

4. Summarise feedback, but without losing sight of the details...

Grouping and categorising feedback received will help you understand the variety and type of information collected. To get you started, you might want to prepare simple summary statements about the main themes that come up. This can help you gain an overview of the responses, but also develop more specific metrics or indicators for measuring feedback over a longer period of time.

Having said that, it is also important to dedicate time to taking each piece of feedback at face value. Avanzar, an organisation in Argentina working to support communities with low socio-economic status through micro-loans, is making sure that no piece of feedback is ignored, no matter how small. To do so, they organise feedback in thematic groups, and flag comments or concerns raised that do not seem to fit into any category. They use these “uncategorised” comments and other critical feedback in focus groups and meetings to spark discussions and better understand if the feedback they received also applies to the wider group, and how. This approach is particularly useful when trying to validate feedback about suggestions and proposed ways forward with a wider group of constituents. For example, Avanzar uses this approach to design new capacity building and vocational training activities for their primary constituents.

5. … but don't get overly nervous about the feedback from one person

All feedback counts and it is important to neither miss nor cherry pick what information you look at! But while this is key, you should also be wary of implementing changes based on the opinions of a single person. Here is a mantra we like to go by: *while every piece of feedback is valuable, it needs to be critically examined and reflected upon.*

For example, our partner in Uganda received a complaint from someone who felt they had not received proper Malaria treatment. They decided to investigate the incident and determine whether others have had a similar experience. After understanding the situation better, they found that the person filing the complaint had simply compared their treatment to that of someone at a more advanced stage of the illness, and who had therefore received a different type of medication. The organisation therefore made sure to explain how medication is distributed and the complainant was satisfied with the response.

This was a case of misunderstanding, but other times particular feedback may reflect more serious personal experiences you may not be aware of. Therefore what is most important is having a clear process for how to examine and critically reflect on the information you collect!

6. Data analysis software and tools are very useful …and can also be very accessible!

Your objectives and what you are hoping to learn will inform how you treat the data you have collected: Do you average out numerical data? Or maybe plot your quantitative data into a graph to pick up trends? Do you organise your qualitative data into categories? Based on what results you want to get from your analysis there are different tools and software which can help you get there.

If your dataset is rather small, or if your organisation primarily uses offline communication tools, or is not very confident with data analysis, using a simple spreadsheet (e.g. Microsoft Excel or Google Sheets), to help you structure and analyse your feedback will usually be sufficient. Spreadsheets can help you analyse quantitative data, like calculate averages, produce simple charts, and identify patterns in your dataset.

If you collect a lot of data online or use more complex methodologies for your surveys, such as the Net Promoter Score (NPS), you may need more advanced tools to support you in your analysis. Resilient Roots uses different data analysis software, ranging from *R* to *Kobo Toolbox* and *NPS Calculator*. What matters is not how fancy or advanced your systems are, but rather having a clear idea of what you need your data to tell you and how you can get there!

7. Present a summary of feedback to your staff and discuss feasibility

Before you discuss the feedback you received with your primary constituents, it is advisable to first reflect on the findings internally. In a meeting involving a variety of your staff, you can identify priority issues and agree on the proposed changes you want to implement in response to what you have learned. Similar to the Design stage, this will help you promote internal buy-in and ownership of the feedback mechanism across all levels of your organisation.

The Palestinian Center for Communication and Development Strategies (PCCDS) involves a mix of management, field staff, volunteers and even board members in these discussions, which are held during their bi-weekly staff meetings. This helps them get a wide variety of input and perspectives to understand the feedback they receive. More importantly, they make sure to act on the information collected from strategic, operational and programmatic perspectives, and have a common voice for how to respond to feedback.

8. Analyse your accountability mechanism itself

While busy analysing the feedback you received, you should also not forget that the mechanism you use for collecting this data can also be further improved or perhaps changed to improve the quality of the data you gather. This is especially important when you are not getting much “useful” feedback. There are a variety of ways you can analyse the tool and method you use.

For example, MarViva, an organisation working to preserve coastal and marine resources in Costa Rica, uses a mixed method approach to evaluate the effectiveness of their feedback mechanism. These include unstructured participatory consultations MarViva has with their constituents during their community assemblies, or more structured interviews with their primary constituents and additional questions in surveys that help them understand the specific shortcomings or strengths of their feedback mechanism. Whichever way you choose, remember to critically reflect on the feedback collection method itself when analysing your results!

9. Compare the feedback you receive over time

Once you are more confident with using accountability feedback mechanisms, you should consider analysing your data over time. This will ultimately allow you to better track progress and identify areas where you may be lagging behind. As your primary constituents become more acquainted with using your feedback mechanism and expressing their thoughts, the nature and type of feedback they give might change. In turn, this can reveal a side of your relationship with them you may not have noticed before.

OVD-Info, a human rights media organisation publicising political prosecutions in Russia, is very interested in understanding how their primary constituent feedback changes across time and platforms. To this end, they have created a dashboard that pulls data from a variety of sources: their website, social media, surveys, hotline data, computer programme bots, etc. Most of this data is then visualised in real-time on the Dashboard, allowing them to see changes in trends and patterns over time. It also helps them to automatically disaggregate the data by different groups of their primary constituents and teams. It also shows whether the changes they have implemented in response to feedback might have affected one group more than the other and where they need to concentrate their efforts in the future.

10. Set up a clear and continuous analysis process and timeline

To make sure you can offer quick and relevant responses to feedback (especially if you have communication channels that can be used by your primary constituents at any time) you need to create continuity in the analysis process as well. This includes internalising the data analysis process into your organisational structure by assigning staff members the tasks of tracking, structuring, grouping, and summarising feedback data.

There is of course no “one size fits all” way to do this. How well and how in-depth you analyse feedback data depends on your resources, staff capacity and experience with research methods. Encountering hurdles along the way and feeling overwhelmed when trying to make sense of information are just normal parts of the learning process. But as we have been emphasising throughout the blog series, the purpose of this exercise is to learn and build stronger relationships with the people and communities your organisation works with: this should be your end goal. You don’t need to be an expert in data analysis for this process to be meaningful. And if you fail along the way, reflect as to why and keep at it - this experience will further improve your feedback analysis skills!