10 tips to collect feedback from your primary constituents

Resilient Roots: conquering the feedback loop - Step 2 of 5: “Collect”

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? Then let’s get started!

In the first blog post of this series we shared 10 steps to design your accountability feedback mechanism. Here we discussed how to set your objectives and layout the infrastructure and resources you will need to see this work through. If you missed it, we suggest you start there before turning to the next step: collecting feedback.

In this second part of our blog series on accountability feedback mechanisms, we want to share common challenges our Resilient Roots partners have encountered when **collecting feedback** from their primary constituents, along with some tips for how to make this process meaningful. Simply collecting feedback won’t make you a more accountable organisation, and it is important to be very intentional about what feedback to gather. This can then help you decide the methods and channels you will use, and the questions you want to ask. All of these aspects, along with the 10 tips below, will make your feedback collection exercise a fruitful, inclusive and productive process. Ultimately, this will help your organisation build a more trusted relationship with your constituents!

1. **Choose feedback collection methods and channels that are appropriate for your primary constituents**

A good starting point is to decide on the method you will use to collect feedback (e.g. surveys, games, focus group discussions, interviews, etc.) and through which communication channel(s) you will engage your constituents (e.g. social media, WhatsApp, in person, phone calls, community meetings, etc.). Both decisions should be determined based on what is appropriate and accessible to the diverse set of people that make up your primary constituent group.

For example, Educo works with young girls and boys, adolescents and parents in Nicaragua. To collect feedback from children in an accessible, fun and creative manner, Educo uses a number of recreational activities. For example, they have adapted traditional songs and games into feedback collection exercises. They also use other didactic methodologies, like drawing, to make the feedback collection process accessible to their younger constituents. Playfulness has helped them to get active participation and valuable inputs from the children they work with.

Figuring out the right mechanism and communications channel is “trial and error” until you find the most suitable approach for your specific context. You can read on a few more examples and other relevant accountability mechanisms in Resilient Roots’ latest case study.

2. Use simple language when explaining why and how you are collecting feedback

In the design stage, you should have already set clear goals and objectives for your accountability feedback mechanism. In the collection phase, it is essential to explain those objectives and the purpose of the exercise to the constituents involved. This should happen using simple and clear language, including when they can expect to hear back from you about findings, conclusions or changes. If at all possible, you should also avoid “NGO terms” like “accountability mechanisms” or “closing the feedback loop”; technical language can not only sound intimidating, but will likely confuse your constituents and potentially undermine the quality of the feedback you collect.

This applies for all parts of a feedback collection exercise, ranging from the questions you ask, through to the title of the event you organise or the online survey you send out. For FemPlatz, avoiding jargon or technical language was particularly important to not alienate their constituents, especially working in a context where there are many prejudices and negative public opinions about NGOs in Serbia that particularly concern feminist organisations. So, when collecting feedback about women’s rights and gender equality, they framed conversations as ‘women’s everyday life’, discussing things like free time, social and cultural events, challenges with transportation, health services, gender-based violence, employment, etc. Another strategy they applied was calling the activity ‘coffee with a friend', instead of ‘focus group discussions’, to give it a more personal sound. Before conducting the feedback collection exercise, they also tested their method and tools on a few women representing their diverse constituency, to test whether the approach was appropriate and clear enough before sharing it more widely.

3. Be aware of the fears of your primary constituents and create an environment of trust

Depending on the nature of your relationship with your primary constituents, they might be hesitant to criticise your work. This is more likely if you are a service-delivery organisation and your primary constituents are relatively dependent upon your support. You need to explore any potential fears they might have about giving honest feedback, identify where they are coming from and develop strategies to overcome them. There is no one size fits all solution to this, and it really depends on the nature and context of your work.

For example, Avanzar is a service-delivery organisation from Argentina. They experience a lot of courtesy bias when they are collecting feedback from the constituents that receive micro-loans and income-generating trainings from their organisation. This is because constituents perceive that responding positively when asked for feedback will put them in a more favourable position to receive further support from Avanzar. As a result, they seldom hear from constituents what they are doing wrong or could improve. To mitigate this, Avanzar puts a lot of work and persistence into explaining the reasons for collecting feedback and how they will use this to improve their services (instead of taking them away).

Often however, anonymity is the best way to create a free environment for people to give their honest feedback, so that they are not directly associated with the criticism they raise. This is why the Resilient Roots initiative decided to use anonymous surveys conducted by external consultants to measure every organisation's accountability to primary constituent. While in very closed communities bringing in a stranger to conduct a survey can create mistrust, in general the approach was very successful in creating a safe space for constituents to raise critical feedback openly. You can read more on the methodology for measuring your organisation's accountability here.

4. Mitigate cultural biases too, because sometimes trust is not enough!

Unfortunately, in certain cases creating safe spaces and building trust with constituents is still not enough to collect honest feedback. Cultural biases may also be at play, particularly in societies where speaking your mind openly or giving constructive feedback is seen as disrespectful or inappropriate. Cultural biases are often very context-specific in nature and need to be explored for each organisation individually - they are definitely a hard nut to crack and you will need more time and diligence to overcome them. But similarly to the points raised above, understanding where a certain bias is coming from is essential to coming up with the right mitigation strategy.

This is the case for Project Jeune Leader (PJL), an organisation providing sexual health education to young students in Madagascar, where courtesy bias is deeply embedded in the culture of the communities in which they work. After testing a series of approaches, they found that, in addition to making feedback collection entirely confidential, staff members with excellent interpersonal skills and a genuine interest and stake in what the primary constituents had to say, were crucial to successfully collecting negative or critical feedback.

Solidarity Now, an organisation supporting refugees in Greece, struggled with cultural biases between women and men in very patriarchal cultures and how this influenced constituent's ability to give feedback openly. To address this challenge, they adapted their feedback collection approach and separated groups of respondents based on gender, to create a more conducive environment for feedback collection and ensure both women and men could speak their minds.

5. Be deliberate but allow your primary constituents to raise their own questions

Collecting feedback has to be a balancing act between getting information you need and will act on, while also having an approach that is flexible enough to let your constituents raise the points that are important to them. Keep in mind that this exercise aims to strengthen your relationship with your primary constituents, and therefore their needs (or trying to understand what these are) should always guide your feedback collection approach. This point is crucial when you want to move away from simply collecting feedback, to creating an accountability mechanism that is about putting your primary constituents at the centre of what you do.

Again there are different strategies you can apply to make that happen. An easy way to start is to use a mix of closed and open questions to make your feedback collection method more flexible. For example the Palestinian Center for Communication and Development Strategies (PCCDS) collected feedback through an online survey that they shared via a facebook page. In their survey, they asked an open question on whether the Facebook page is a good tool for their primary constituents to raise concerns, to understand if the method and the communications channel was appropriate. They also included the question: “Is there anything else you would like to tell us?” which encourages their primary constituents to bring up any questions or concerns they want the organisation to answer.

This does not mean that when it comes to feedback, the more you collect the better. On the contrary, often organisations collect far more feedback from constituents than they either need or have the ability to actually use. Therefore, it is important to be extremely intentional and strategic with the feedback we collect, to make the process less resource intensive, manage expectations and not waste anyone’s time. Because knowing exactly what to ask can be really hard, an approach such as the one suggested above can be a good place to start, to ensure your feedback collection exercise is both deliberate and flexible!

6. Try to be as representative and inclusive as possible with your respondents

Usually, your primary constituents will consist of a diverse subset of people. Within your primary constituent groups there will likely be differences in age and gender, education, socio-economic status and their position in society. These are factors you have to keep in mind when starting to collect feedback from a subset of your primary constituents, to ensure that the people you are engaging are as representative as possible of the diversity of experiences within your primary constituent group.

However, sometimes being aware of differences is not enough to have a feedback collection exercise that is inclusive, and you might have to adapt your method based on the groups you need to engage. Jeunes Volontaires pour l’Environnement (JVE) in Benin works with two very different groups of primary constituents from distinctive socio-cultural backgrounds. JVE has thus designed very specific feedback collection mechanisms for each group that adapt to their specific needs and preferred ways of communication. On the one hard, to collect feedback from the group of women fish-smokers they had to take into account that most of them cannot read and write, or have access to the internet. Consequently, JVE collects their feedback in person, either through an intermediary group of women they have trained or through simplified cards that use emojis and colors (such as green = good; yellow = okay; red = bad). On the other hand, their group of members and volunteers is very-well connected and includes many university students, so JVE uses mostly online tools to collect their feedback, such as online surveys, email or through a WhatsApp group.

7. Make sure you apply safeguarding measures when working with vulnerable groups

Being inclusive also means you may collect feedback from very vulnerable populations, including people with disabilities, children, elderly people, ethnic minorities, etc. When collecting feedback from these groups, you need to get educated about potential risks that participating in your activities might bring for these people, and how you can manage these risks. For example, before any feedback collection took place, Educo made sure they had authorisation from parents to allow their children to engage in their accountability activities. As a bonus, this further helped the organisation to secure the continuous participation of children, and created an active and involved community of parents too.

However, you need to keep in mind that who is considered a ‘vulnerable group’ can be very context-specific. It changes from country to country and from group to group. So for instance, a group of women that may be considered vulnerable in some places may not be considered vulnerable in others, or may be vulnerable for very different reasons, which in turn means that they have different safeguarding requirements. You first and foremost need to recognise the sensitivities that exist in your context and then find proper measures to address these. To safeguard a vulnerable group appropriately you need to dismantle what makes them vulnerable and then apply unique ways to approach this.

8. Be prepared to deal with unintended consequences and to manage expectations

Especially when you are collecting feedback from your primary constituents for the first time, the idea of suddenly being criticised for your work or allowing constituents to raise all their concerns can feel very intimidating. Before collecting feedback, many staff members at Video Volunteers were worried about not being able to manage expectations accordingly, or letting their primary constituents (community journalists) down by not being able to respond adequately to all of their feedback. They also worried that creating false expectations would negatively affect the level of engagement and trust in the organisation. However, they learned that collecting feedback does not mean an obligation to fulfill every request your primary constituents make of you. What creates trust is engaging in a dialogue and participating. Clearly explaining why a certain expectation cannot be met and coming up with solutions together need to be integral parts of every feedback collection exercise.

However, unintended consequences will of course arise, and from the get-go you should preempt how to mitigate context-specific risks. Projet Jeune Leader, besides working with young people, recognises parents are an important group the organisation has to be accountable to. In one of their feedback collection exercises, PJL realised that many parents were not aware of what the organisation does, while others had serious concerns about sexual health education and even wanted to remove their children from the programme. This was an important unintended consequence of their accountability effort, which they addressed by training their staff on how to respond to criticisms and concerns, while engaging skeptical parents and teachers in theatre workshops. These workshops aimed to break down negative cultural attitudes towards sexual health education, and instead get them to become supporters of their work.

9. Make sure that the channels you open for feedback are constantly monitored

In addition to the more strategic moments to specifically collect feedback mentioned above, having a communication channel or a physical space that is available and accessible to your primary constituents on a constant basis, is the ideal way to establish a culture of accountability and ongoing dialogue with your organisation. But for these “always open” tools to be effective, you need to ensure feedback coming in is constantly monitored and followed up accordingly by a designated person at your organisation. Our partner organisation in Uganda, for example, has created a free telephone line that is available 24/7. Solidarity Now in Greece, have set up feedback and complaints boxes at strategic points in their reception centres, where their primary constituents often come by. OVD-info from Russia have set up a bot in the messaging app Telegram that takes in messages from their primary constituents.

The possibilities to set up open feedback channels are endless, but for the exercise to be successful, what happens after constituents submit feedback has to be very clearly laid out. To ensure consistency and reliability, you might want to designate a member of staff to follow up on the feedback and set up a plan for what to do with the information after it has been collected. Nothing is more damaging when it comes to accountability mechanisms than feedback that is left unanswered. As we highlighted before, these mechanisms should be about building meaningful relationships and trust with your primary constituents, grounded in transparency, active listening and dialogue.

10. Not getting “good” feedback probably means you are not using the right approach

To put it simply, we like to think of “good” feedback as actionable, or feedback that we can use to better understand what our constituents think of our work and how we can deliver more impactful activities. “Good” feedback should not be confused with “positive feedback”. We understand “good” feedback as something that is enabling the organisation to act in some way as a response to it. In fact, actionable feedback often tends to be critical of an organisation’s work. Several things make feedback actionable, such as the level of detail and insight shared, its relevance, its practical value, etc.

When collecting feedback for the first time, it is often difficult to collect “good” feedback for many of the reasons mentioned above: courtesy bias and/or cultural bias, lack of familiarity with feedback collection exercises, or even the feeling that feedback will not be acted upon. At other times, difficulties collecting “good” and usable feedback have to do with the way you ask questions, how engaged your constituents are on the topic, or even the mechanism to collect feedback in the first place. For example, our partner in Uganda who provides medical services to people living with HIV/AIDS, has struggled to collect actionable feedback from their constituents, and as a result they have had to adapt significantly their approach. This has led them to spend several months explaining why they collect feedback and what they use it for, combine several mechanisms like in-person open dialogues and anonymous feedback boxes, telephone lines, surveys and more.

However this doesn't mean you should disregard positive feedback. Positive feedback can be just as powerful and informative. Some organisations may only focus on the constructive and make many changes to an activity without even considering all of the positive aspects of that same activity first! Positive feedback can be very actionable too, not only to know what are the strongest areas of your work, but also to advocate for the work of your organisation with other stakeholders. Above all, "good" positive feedback can very powerfully demonstrate the value of your organisation and the impact it has on the lives of your primary constituents.