

## Complaints from Beneficiaries: A Valuable Resource for Project Implementation

By Robert C. May, Karin Oswald, and Pieter Smidt

- **Problems often arise in large and complex projects, leading to complaints from intended beneficiaries.**
- **The Asian Development Bank's Earthquake and Tsunami Emergency Support Project in Indonesia established several avenues for receiving and responding to complaints at the project level.**
- **The complaint-handling systems provided feedback about problems and enabled their early resolution before they escalated into difficult issues, resulting in smoother project implementation.**

### Challenges

The setting for the project seemed destined for problems. In 2004, the project area had been devastated by a huge tsunami and earthquake that caused massive loss of life and property, in a place that had experienced decades of civil conflict. The project itself was challenging and complex, including 12 components and requiring coordination of numerous agencies and teams of consultants.

Recognizing the potential for problems, the project grant agreement required that a grievance mechanism be established to receive and respond to beneficiaries' complaints and concerns. But no guidance was available on how to set up an effective complaint-handling system.

### Approach

The Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Office of the Special Project Facilitator helped the project design and launch a complaint-handling mechanism. A key element was strong support from the senior management of the project's executing agency and the ADB through its Extended Mission in Sumatra. This support ensured that staff and financial resources were made available to operationalize the complaint-handling system.

Complaint-handling was included in the terms of reference of implementers, consultants, and service providers. Designated staff were made responsible for dealing directly with complainants, and competent focal persons managed and coordinated complaint-handling. A crucial task was making the complaint-handling system known and accessible. The project widely disseminated information on how and where to complain using multiple channels and approaches.

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See also the publication on *Complaint Handling in the Rehabilitation of Aceh and Nias. Experiences of the Asian Development Bank and Other Organizations* available at <http://www.adb.org/Documents/Books/Complaint-Handling-Rehabilitation/default.asp>

**Earthquake and Tsunami Emergency Sector Project (ETESP) - Indonesia** [www.adb.org/Projects/ETESP/default.asp](http://www.adb.org/Projects/ETESP/default.asp)

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Resolving a complaint through on-site discussion

People who had complaints could choose among several places to file their grievances. If they were reluctant to avail of one avenue, they could use another with which they felt more comfortable. Each system for receiving complaints included a provision for referral to a higher level in case people were not satisfied with the initial response. In some parts of the project area, traditional ways of dealing with problems were still strong, and in these situations the project merged grievance procedures with the indigenous systems.

### Results

The project was able to identify and deal with problems early and efficiently, before they escalated into difficult issues. Taking complaints seriously and treating them as valuable sources of project information was the key. Due to careful preparation and high-level support, the possibility that project personnel might hide or ignore complaints was averted, and a more constructive and encouraging attitude toward beneficiaries was fostered, then adopted. Most complaints were dealt with readily by competent staff at the community level. Only a few issues were elevated to higher levels for resolution.

The complaint-handling system led to enhanced accountability of project implementers and increased satisfaction of beneficiaries. Community members who might have lashed out in frustration, casting unwarranted suspicion on persons because of delays and things going wrong, became more open to discussing concrete steps to address problems as they arose. Communities were empowered to act and interact directly, and stronger partnerships and goodwill developed. The feedback received through the complaint-handling system also led to improved designs and adjustments in implementation arrangements.

The bottom line was an improved project outcome: in spite of its difficult circumstances, the project was implemented with minimal serious impediments and problems. Since problems were resolved as they arose at the field level, the Office of the Special Project Facilitator received no formal complaints.

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