

Implementing Oxfam Public Complaints Policy in the International Division

Guidelines

Purpose

These guidelines outline how we will implement Oxfam's public complaints policy in the International Division. It is the responsibility of all staff to ensure that any one wishing to make a formal complaint about Oxfam's programme and/or ways of working is able to do so in an accessible way.

We have gone into some detail to ensure that staff have sufficient information to enable them to implement the public complaints policy. That said, the guidelines provide the framework we will use. Sound and fair judgement will be required at each stage of the process to ensure effective and efficient implementation.

These guidelines should be read alongside the complaints policy itself.
http://intranet.oxfam.org.uk/internal_policies/finance/complaintspolicy

Introduction

Increasing our accountability to individuals, communities and partners for and with whom we work is a key objective for Oxfam. As part of this, an organisation-wide public complaints policy has now been agreed. Ensuring that people living in poverty can hold us to account will improve the quality of our programmes and bring greater impact. As an NGO committed to ensuring governments and others are held to account by civil society, we must live our values and improve our own practice in holding ourselves – and being held – to account.

There is an important difference between complaints and feedback. Feedback can be both positive and negative and is generally to do with minor issues; it can be given formally or informally. Complaints are often to do with more serious issues, when things have gone wrong and when whoever makes the complaint wants a change to occur.

In setting up a complaints mechanism we are demonstrating our openness to learning: we recognise that we are fallible, that we do make mistakes and that we can learn from them. A cultural shift is required in order that we welcome and encourage complaints as helpful information rather than avoiding them and seeing them as failure.

A complaints mechanism needs to be proactive in seeking out complaints that need to be made: most of those with and through whom we work, almost without exception, find themselves in an unequal power relationship with NGO workers.

Key Principles

- Complainants must be treated with respect. Staff receiving complaints must listen, accept the complaint, be courteous and committed to solving the complaint.
- If complaints can be solved (relatively) immediately and on the spot then staff must be encouraged (and managed) to do so.
- If a complaint is not (relatively) immediately solvable it needs to be recorded on a standard Complaints Registration form. Once a complaint has been written down it is considered to be a **formal complaint** and becomes the responsibility of the Country Programme Manager (CPM). If the complaint is about the CPM then it becomes the responsibility of the Regional Programme Manager (RPM) or other designated regional manager.
- Complaints must be dealt with in confidence. And the principle of confidentiality needs to be made clear to complainants.
- Formal complaints must be replied to within 10 working days of receiving them.

. If a complaint is not upheld and the complainant remains unhappy they have a right to appeal (once). They must be informed of this right. Appeals go to and are the responsibility of the next level of senior management.

Implementing the Complaints Mechanism

There are up to 5 stages to handling informal and formal complaints respectively:

- o advertising the complaints mechanism
- o receiving complaints
- o clarifying complaints (informal and formal)
- o resolving the complaint:
 - o immediately if resolving an informal complaint
 - o investigating complaints – for formal complaints
- o learning from complaints and amending our practice appropriately

Please see the flowchart at the end of this document for a visual representation of how the various stages link.

1. ***Advertising and communicating the existence of Oxfam's public complaints policy.*** Ensure that the right to complain is well known, that the mechanism by which complaints can be made is clear and well known and that we will maintain confidentiality at all times. Information on the complaints mechanism will need to be in an appropriate language.¹

Advertising/communication the above can be done in any number of ways, here are some suggestions: mentioning/explaining it in meetings with communities, posters around project sites, in schools, on the back of ration/entitlement cards, by radio, in newspapers, in offices, in local government offices, etc.

Staff should make partners aware of the complaints policy as part of any discussion around continuing or setting up a new partnership.

2. ***Receiving complaints.*** Ensure that it is clear to staff, partners and to the community at large to whom and how complaints can be made. Managers and team leaders will need to talk through the guidelines and complaints policy with staff likely to receive complaints to ensure that they understand the rationale behind the complaints policy.

Receiving complaints can be done in any number of ways and decisions must be made (in conjunction with the local community as appropriate) as to what is most appropriate. Some suggestions: have an open door policy; have an open door policy once a week; have one designated staff member that is always accessible; have a mobile complaints team; have a complaints clinic at distribution or active project sites; involve the local authorities (this has been known to work!); use feedback/complaints boxes.

Remember, we need to be proactive about hearing complaints and feedback and we need to make the means by which this will happen as accessible (and this means as appropriate) as possible.

Staff receiving complaints must be able to listen, to accept the complaint and to be respectful – even if the complaint is not one that Oxfam GB is able to respond to the complainant is aggrieved in some way.

3. ***Clarifying the complaint (informal and formal).*** All staff who receive complaints need to be able to do two important things: clarify what the complaint is and determine whether it is one to which Oxfam GB is able to respond.

¹ The complaints policy will be translated centrally into core languages; Regions/countries will do further local translations as needed

Oxfam GB defines a complaint as ‘an expression of dissatisfaction about the standards of service, actions or lack of action, by Oxfam GB or its staff and volunteers’. For further information on what might or might not constitute a complaint please see the Complaints Policy.

Staff receiving and clarifying complaints need to be capable of analysis, patience, and diplomacy. If a complaint does not fit the above definition then the complainant should, politely, be turned away. If the complaint is about another NGO then this should be pointed out to the complainant; if it is possible to direct the complainant to someone else who will deal with their complaint then this should be done.

In order to establish what the complaint is and its validity, interpreters might be needed. The **complaint registration form** (attached) should be filled in and signed by both Oxfam GB and the complainant. Once filled out and signed, the complaint registration forms must go directly to the CPM.

4. **Resolving complaints**

4.1 *Resolving complaints locally and informally:*

The majority of complaints Oxfam GB receives will be resolved immediately with common sense and knowledge of the programme. Staff must be encouraged and supported to do this if at all possible. If a complaint is immediately resolved, it is still good practice to fill in the complaint registration form, adding what was done to remedy the complaint. Complaint registration forms should be kept – confidentially - by the CPM.

4.2 *Resolving formal complaints (with some kind of investigation)*

Some complaints about programmes and/or staff ways of working cannot be resolved immediately or easily. If complaints are programme related, they are likely to require time, effort and analysis to resolve – but they should be resolvable in countries where we have operative teams and resources. Others may be more complex and may require additional support (eg. audit, regional staff, etc).

Oxfam GB has investigation procedures already in place for some types of public complaints. These are well documented, available through senior / regional management and/or on the intranet. These procedures should be used for complaints that allege staff sexual misconduct or sexual exploitation, staff malpractice and fraud. It is usual and sensible for external resources to be used in any of these procedures; it is expected that the CPM would commission and manage their implementation.

Once a decision has been made on how to resolve a complaint this should be acted upon **as soon as possible**. The complainant should be informed that their complaint has or hasn't been upheld:

- *If complaint is upheld*, advise the complainant that action has been taken. It is sometimes important, for the sake of confidentiality, that the complainant is NOT told what action has been taken: this is most likely to be the case in sexual misconduct allegations.

In addition it is important to inform staff that a complaint has been received, investigated and action taken. This step can be vital in maintaining/restoring staff moral and upholding our wish to be an accountable organisation. Again it is important that the principle of confidentiality is upheld: sometimes it will not be possible to tell staff precisely who is involved and what action has been taken.

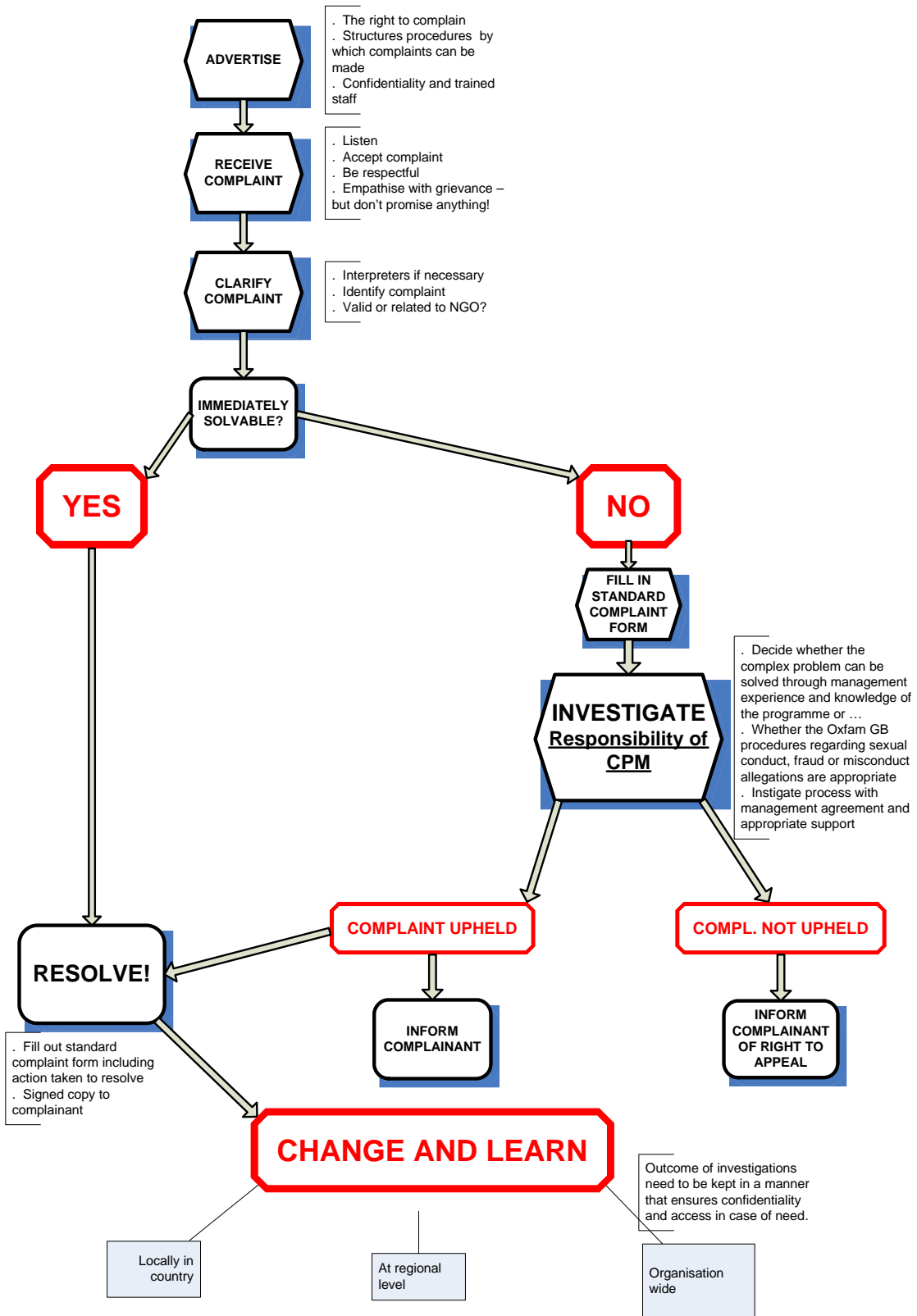
This, in most cases, will be the end of a complaints process. The complaint registration form should be updated with the actions taken and held by the CPM who will ensure confidentiality.

- *If a complaint is not upheld*, the complainant must be informed of this and of their right to formal appeal, taking the complaint to the next level of senior management, usually the RPM.

Staff should contact the complainant within 10 working days of receiving the complaint to advise the complainant of the decision; if a decision has not been reached, the complainant should be provided with a progress report with an indication of a likely date of conclusion.

- 5. Learning and improving/changing practice** A key part of the complaint process is to identify any issues that need to be addressed in our programme delivery and/or ways of working so that similar complaints do not arise. This will be the responsibility of staff receiving the complaint, especially if the issue is at a local level, with overall responsibility resting with the CPM for country-level learning. Regions will be responsible for picking up issues at Region-wide level, and we will use our Divisional reporting system to monitor for wider points we need to tackle at Divisional or organisational levels.

October 2007



Complaint Registration Form

Country/Region	
Person receiving or handling complaint	
Name of complainant	
Contact details of complainant	
Nature of complaint(s)	
Name of subject of complaint (SOC); incl prog position	
Outline of the complaint(s) being made (continue on another sheet if necessary)	
Date alleged incident to place	
Further details – location, time, etc	
Contact details of any witnesses	
Further information of interest and/or additional comment	
Supporting evidence	
Outcome/Result (to incl conclusion; action taken; date resolved)	
Learning points; action being taken; by whom; when	

The complaint was written up by _____ (name of staff member) on _____ (date).

Please give a signed copy to the complainant.

Oxfam GB undertakes to contact the complainant within 10 working days regarding the complaint that has been made.