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Asian Development Bank
6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City
1550 Metro Manila, Philippines
www.adb.org
Publication Stock No.: 071008

Printed in the Philippines



Handling Complaints Efficiently

Lessons Learned from the
Earthquake and Tsunami
Emergency Support Project
in Indonesia

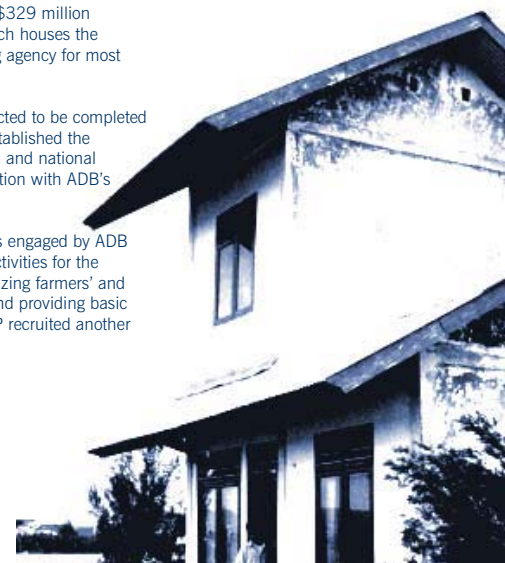


The Project and Its Institutional Arrangements

The powerful earthquakes and tsunami that hit Aceh Province and Nias Island, Indonesia, in December 2004 and March 2005 caused massive damage and staggering loss of life. More than half a million people were left homeless, livelihoods were devastated, and much public infrastructure was destroyed. The Government of Indonesia (GOI) responded with a Master Plan for rehabilitation and reconstruction and established the Aceh-Nias Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Board (BRR) to coordinate all relief efforts, including those of external agencies. About \$6 billion has been mobilized so far. The Earthquake and Tsunami Emergency Support Project (ETESP) Grant Agreement signed by the GOI and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in April 2005 is providing \$329 million for assistance in 12 sectors. The Executing Agency is BRR, which houses the Project Management Office (PMO) and is also the implementing agency for most subprojects.

Implementation of the ETESP started in April 2005 and is expected to be completed by December 2008. To facilitate project administration, ADB established the Extended Mission in Sumatra (EMS) in July 2005. International and national advisors coordinate and monitor ETESP components in conjunction with ADB's Southeast Asia Department and Indonesia Resident Mission.

A local nongovernment organization (NGO), Bina Swadaya, was engaged by ADB for the provision of community empowerment and organizing activities for the agriculture, fisheries, and irrigation sectors. This includes organizing farmers' and water users' associations, facilitating community discussions, and providing basic capacity building for community-based associations. The ETESP recruited another six NGOs under its housing component.



Benefits of a Grievance Mechanism

Grievances give notice of problems early and provide information on the quality and adequacy of a project's design and implementation. Grievance mechanisms underpin client orientation and promote transparency. The more complex a project is, the more likely it is that complaints will arise and the more important it is to devise efficient ways of dealing with them. Setting up a grievance mechanism provides clarity and greater efficiency in dealing with complaints.

Rationale for Establishing Grievance Mechanisms

Grievance mechanisms were established under the ETESP to help resolve disputes and conflicts arising during implementation, particularly during the preparation and implementation of subprojects; to ensure that resources under the Project were used for the intended purpose; and to help ensure open communication and feedback among project implementers, communities, and beneficiaries. The legal basis for the establishment of the mechanism is contained in the ETESP Grant Agreement, which requires the GOI to establish a grievance review and resolution mechanism within BRR.¹

Important Features of the ETESP Grievance Mechanisms

There are multiple intake points for ETESP-related complaints and queries. The units and individual staff are knowledgeable about implementation schedules and budget, eligibility for support, and civil works design. They can respond to simple queries directly. In case the complainant is not satisfied with the responses or actions taken, he or she can take the query to a higher level in the complaint mechanism. In addition, the public can access existing external grievance redress and anticorruption systems under BRR. Anyone with a complaint, feedback, or question related to the goods, civil works, project staff, consultants, provincial or district offices of government line ministries, and others involved in the ETESP has the right to register complaints or questions.

All complaints and feedback are treated with confidentiality. The complainant or reporter may or may not reveal his or her identity. Complaints, grievances, feedback, or queries about the ETESP can be reported through letter, SMS/text message, verbal narration (from walk-in complainants), phone call, or facsimile. A memo from the Head of EMS supports the establishment of grievance mechanisms and clarifies their implementation.

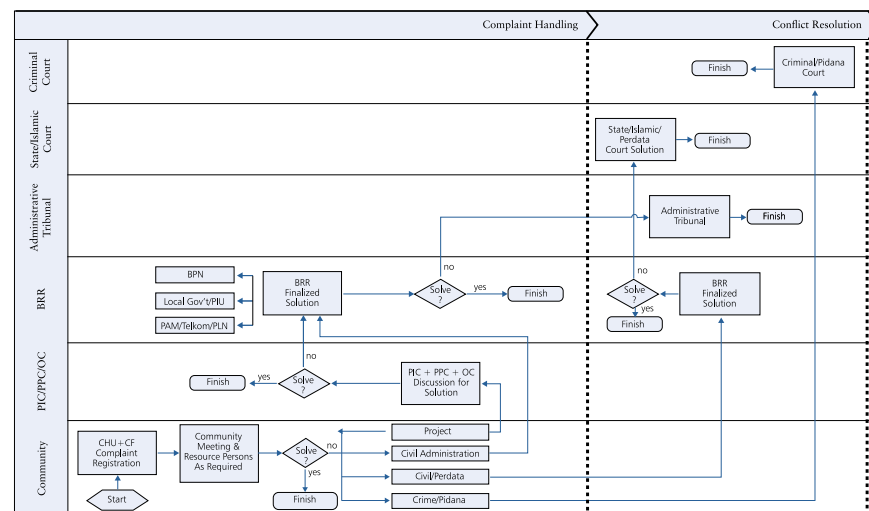
Establishing Grievance Mechanisms

Setting up grievance mechanisms involves the following steps: defining the scope, principles, and types of complaints; and detailing the complaint-handling process, which includes its commencement, processing, action, and feedback. Technically, the setting up of a grievance mechanism requires a flow chart that shows the grievance intake points, the levels at which and by whom complaints are dealt with, and the feedback flow. The responsibilities for keeping the log (registering and updating), grievance focal points (sorting, acknowledging receipt, referring, providing guidance, and reviewing progress), and individual staff are clearly assigned. It is the project management's responsibility to create an environment conducive to complaint management, and to provide skills for complaint facilitation.

The grievance mechanisms are tailor-made, adapted to and varying with the implementation arrangements and staffing of the different sectors and units. This has resulted in different flow charts, with all of them being part of an overall complaint-handling system. The grievance mechanisms are also graded: issues that cannot be resolved at the village level are referred to the next higher level, and to a third level, if needed. A complainant who does not agree with the action or decision on a complaint may file an appeal with the next higher level of the grievance redress system. At the village level, complaints are worked out using existing traditional and village-level conflict resolution structures, where possible. In the housing sector, community-based associations organized under the project also act as grievance intake units and facilitators. Subdistrict-based grievance committees organized and funded by Transparency International also help in grievance facilitation.

A complainant who does not agree with the action or decision on a complaint may file an appeal with the next higher level of the grievance redress system.

Sample Complaint-Handling Flow Chart of the Housing Component



Source: Hasan, Izziah, and Jose Tiburcio Nicolas. 2008. Earthquake and Tsunami Emergency Support Project (ETESP) Grievance Mechanism. Manila: ADB.

¹ The Agreement stipulates that the GOI put in place mechanisms to deal with citizen grievances and that such mechanisms involve reviewing and addressing grievances of citizens, beneficiaries, and other stakeholders of the project; and establishing the threshold criteria and procedures for handling such grievances, for proactively and constructively responding to them, and for providing the public with notice of such mechanism, including publishing notes in newspapers. For more details refer to www.adb.org/Documents/RRPs/INO/rrp-ino-39127.pdf, pp. 31–32.



Participatory Design and Training

Staff from the different sectors jointly designed their grievance mechanisms in a series of complaint management workshops with the objectives to support a streamlined approach to complaint handling among the diverse stakeholders involved in implementing the ETESP; draft flow charts for complaint management and discuss links to relevant existing external mechanisms; clarify the responsibilities and functions of the many actors involved in ETESP complaint handling; and train staff in appropriate complaint facilitation. Five training sessions for different target groups were held:

- a two-day session for the PMO, design and implementation sector consultants of the different components, and Bina Swadaya;
- a half-day workshop for the project implementation units (PIUs);
- a two-day training session for NGOs involved in the housing component; and
- two one-day pilot training sessions for village mobilization facilitators and community mobilization specialists from Bina Swadaya.

A ready-to-use orientation module for the PMO was developed, which enabled the ETESP to further orient village mobilization facilitators and community mobilization specialists.



The Grievance Facilitation Unit

The Grievance Facilitation Unit (GFU) was set up to provide an independent outside grievance mechanism and to comply with the Grant Agreement. The scope of the GFU runs across the various sectors and levels. The GFU receives complaints directly from beneficiaries and from the general public through SMS, phone calls, and office visits, and during field visits. Village facilitators also forward complaints they receive from the public that are not directly related to their specific activities or subprojects, and EMS sometimes refers cases for follow-up. The GFU monitors media reports on issues or complaints related to ETESP operations or staff and conducts validation visits to check on the veracity of the reports as part of its proactive and preventive complaint-handling responsibilities.

The GFU Office was mobilized in June 2007 and is composed of a Facilitation Specialist supported by one technical staff and one administrative staff. Badan Pengawas provided office furnishings. The existence and contact details of the GFU were advertised in local newspapers, and the GFU conducted community orientations. Flyers on the complaint-handling system were distributed in these orientation sessions and during fieldwork.

The GFU's functions include maintaining a database of grievance cases and queries on the ETESP; designing and overseeing the conduct of orientation sessions; coordinating, verifying, and following up on ETESP-related grievances and coordinating with external accountability mechanisms (e.g., the multidonor fund ombudsman, or the anticorruption commission); analyzing trends and concerns and proposing actions to address these; and serving as facilitator or mediator to settle conflicts.

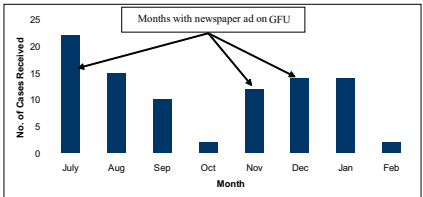
During its first 9 months, a total of 91 cases were recorded in the grievance database of the GFU. A little over half (51%) were received via SMS. Another 31% were phone calls. A few others were walk-in complaints (7%), mailed complaints (1%), and complaints raised during field visits/workshops conducted by the GFU (6%) or referred by EMS (3%).

When the GFU ran advertisements in local newspapers, the volume of complaints received from the public increased (see figure). This indicates the importance of using the media in improving the visibility of the GFU.

More than half of the cases (49 cases or 54%) were complaints against project staff and implementers. Another 36 cases (40%) were questions and comments. A few others (6%) were allegations of corruption or irregularities in procurement. Most complaints and questions came from beneficiaries (36%) or concerned citizens and neighbors (21%). A few others were raised by village heads (6%) or by project implementers, staff, or workers (4%). A considerable number of the questions and complaints received by the GFU were from anonymous senders, callers, or persons who requested to have their identity kept confidential and undisclosed. To the extent possible, efforts are made to respond, validate, or address anonymous calls and reports.

Complaints and questions received revolved around quality issues, delay in implementation or funding, exclusion of beneficiaries or allegation of wrong beneficiary targeting, allegation of corruption or irregularities, adverse effects of the subproject, salaries of project staff/workers, budget changes/discrepancies, and other concerns.

In terms of location, the bulk of the cases (77%) were in Aceh Province. Another 11% were in Nias Island, while another 11% were general or unspecified. Complaints and questions came from 13 districts. However, the majority of these were in Pidie (14%), Aceh Barat (14%), Banda Aceh (13%), Aceh Besar (10%), and Bireuen (10%).



Source: Hasan and Nicolas. *op. cit.*

Classification of Complaints

Type A: Queries, comments, and suggestions

Type B: Allegations of violations of rights or poor performance of consultants, contractors, staff, government officials, or NGOs

Type C: Allegations of fraud and/or corruption

Type D: Allegations of violations of law and of criminal activities

An Independent GFU

Having an independent GFU encourages people to come forward and raise their complaints, and expedites resolution of cases. Although there are sector-specific complaint-handling mechanisms, a number of complainants are more comfortable approaching the GFU to raise their concerns. Others who are not satisfied with the response or action they obtain from the sector consultants or PIU can approach the GFU to seek assistance. Moreover, resolution of cases is facilitated when the GFU helps follow up with the concerned PIU or consultant team.



Lessons Learned 1

Set up an effective complaint-handling mechanism

- Identify the budget and include it in project documents. The effectiveness of the grievance mechanism relies on its ability to undertake information dissemination activities (including mass media advertisements) and conduct field verification and validation of complaints at an early stage. Include grievance handling in the terms of reference of consultants.
- Develop an internal system (with the PIUs) with a strong village-level complaint-handling system, clarify levels, and link it to an external complaint-management system to provide the public with various avenues for raising their concerns or queries about the project.
- Designate and train grievance focal points and village facilitators on the grievance mechanism and on their roles early in the process so that concerns and queries can be handled and recorded systematically. This will also determine who among the project staff will be responsible for following up the actions undertaken in relation to the complaints received.

Lessons Learned 2

Avoid or minimize complaints through timely communication

- Many conflicts and complaints arise because of delayed, insufficient, or inconsistent information regarding subproject background, current status of subproject, or proposed changes. Mere socialization activities are inadequate. Delay in the deployment of community and village facilitators also hampers the flow of information.
- Community consultations should be as inclusive as possible.
- Staff must see complaints and grievances as part of their roles and responsibilities.
- Regular coordination meetings between concerned units foster consistency in the information provided to the communities and the public.

Lessons Learned 3

Assure proper functioning

- Post important information (written in the local language) about the subproject, including whom people can contact for clarification, additional information, or suggestions, in key and conspicuous places in the villages. Use of local media is more effective than flyers.
- Reputable people from the local academe can be effective for grievance facilitation. Their knowledge of the local culture and conditions and their reputation in the community enable them to get the trust of the people during grievance facilitation and encourage people to raise their concerns.
- Make extra efforts to reach beneficiaries and key stakeholders who are not present in consultations and planning sessions to inform them and seek their consent.
- Field staff should proactively seek inputs and feedback from the community at the early stage of planning the subproject and provide opportunities to the beneficiaries to express their opinions and concerns before finalizing any planned revisions.
- When problems are identified, it is best to solve them immediately. The longer it takes to find a solution, the larger and more complex each problem becomes, which in turn makes it much harder to solve. Moreover, the real benefits of the subproject as envisaged are delayed.

“For complaint handling to work in a complex project such as the ETESP, everyone needs to have a clear understanding of roles and accountabilities. Complaint handling also requires time and resources, which is not always recognized at the time of project design.”

- Pieter M. Smidt
Extended Mission in Sumatra

Behavioral Change

Complaint handling is affected by the attitude of project implementers about receiving and reporting complaints. During the initial stages, some PIU representatives and consultants viewed complaints as negative marks on their performance. Hence, there was resistance to reporting and addressing complaints that they received from the beneficiaries. Some also viewed complaint handling as an additional burden that would only delay subproject preparation and implementation. It is therefore important that project implementers be properly oriented on complaint handling so that they will treat complaints as opportunities for improving project design, implementation, and outcomes.²

² For a more detailed discussion of the ETESP Grievance Mechanism, see www.adb.org/documents/reports/etesp/ETESP-Grievance-Mechanism.pdf

