



Adventist Development and Relief Agency

**ADRA Complaints and Response Mechanism**

(Approved on March 11, 2016)

NETCOM 16-021

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## **ADRA Complaints and Response Mechanism**

### **I. Purpose**

*The purpose of the Complaints and Response Mechanism is to ensure the organization is fully accountable to all its stakeholders, enabling them to raise complaints and concerns about the work and operations of ADRA. A well-designed complaints mechanism is essential for promoting trust and openness, lifting program quality through learning, and contributing to a culture of accountability across the ADRA network.*

### **II. Policy and approach**

ADRA's Complaints and Response Mechanism Policy has four objectives:

#### ***Maintaining Public Trust***

Official donors, members and supporters and the general public have an expectation that ADRA will be truthful in its advocacy, empowering in its programming, prudent in its stewardship of resources, honest in its marketing and otherwise acting with utmost probity. Being open to complaints and feedback in these expectations is critical for maintaining public trust and ADRA's good reputation. This requires defined, safe, credible, independent processes which are easy to find and use.

#### ***Ensuring Rights of Stakeholders***

Stakeholders (people and organizations with an interest in, or commitment to ADRA) have a right to make a complaint and to seek redress if ADRA falls short of its promise to meet its mission fully and ethically, and/or in a manner consistent with human rights standards. ADRA commits to open, timely and even-handed processes to achieve resolution of such complaints.

#### ***Learning for quality***

A complaints and response mechanism is a vital part of ensuring the quality of the programs ADRA supports, ensuring that the organization is open to legitimate criticism and acts to learn from mistakes and critical feedback that suggests different approaches. Ensuring that stakeholders can hold ADRA to account will improve the quality of the work.

#### ***Greater Accountability***

A Complaints and Response Mechanism is a means to balance the power differences between ADRA on one hand, and its program partners and communities on the other, whether through funding relationships or advocacy partnerships. Partners and communities must be able to hold ADRA to account on fair terms when these relationships are not respected. An effective Complaints & Response Mechanism should increase the voice and power of stakeholders

Donors and supporters must be able to raise complaints if ADRA does not meet expectations of

stewardship or delivery. ADRA is committed to learning from complaints relating to poor performance, as part building a culture of greater accountability. ADRA will conduct Action Reviews following complaints, and feed the lessons learned into operational improvements. In some situations, this may also lead to some form of redress for complainants.

ADRA will regularly review the accessibility and efficacy of the Complaints and Response Mechanism to meet these objectives.

### **III. Scope of this Policy**

This policy covers ADRA International and all organs of ADRA. It details different stakeholder groups and where possible, specific complaints channels that apply to each. It will address complaints raised by external stakeholders; communities, beneficiaries, program partners, advocacy and campaign allies, donors, supporters and the general public.

A complaint may be lodged by a person who is not directly affected by ADRA's work; for example a member of the public who believes ADRA is misrepresenting itself may complain on the basis it is in the public interest to do so.

The Policy does not address internal staff grievances or governance disputes (e.g. between Members) with the exception of whistle-blowing, where a staff member or volunteer may not feel 'safe' to raise an issue through the management line, and may prefer to use the independent final process (Ombudsman or Independent Panel - tbd).

The Policy forms the framework and basis for designing more specific complaints processes that may be set up at the program or campaign level (e.g. community committees) which should rely on the Policy and Principles, but allow for more localized approaches in the Procedures.

#### ***Issues that are covered by this policy***

This policy covers the full range of work carried out by ADRA, where-ever it operates and includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Conduct by ADRA staff or ADRA partner staff, or ADRA Boards/Individual Directors.
- Conduct of other stakeholders involved in programs
- Abuse of ADRA's power in programming or advocacy
- Poor practice in programming and humanitarian response
- Exaggerated or unsubstantiated claims in campaigns and advocacy
- Fraud
- Dishonest marketing/misrepresentation
- Sexual and physical abuse of children
- Exploitation of communities, partners, beneficiaries

- Harassment, bullying, victimisation

### ***Issues which are not covered by the policy***

ADRA will consider, but may not accept, frivolous or vexatious complaints, for example;

- Disputes over differences of opinion with ADRA or about ADRA
- Complaints instituted for monetary gain
- Personal disputes with ADRA staff, Board members, volunteers
- Matters that are not relevant to ADRA

Decisions to dismiss a frivolous or vexatious complaint require careful judgement by appropriate managers.

## **IV. Principles**

ADRA's Complaints and Response Mechanism is based on four principles:

### ***Accessibility***

- Widely promoted and publicized among stakeholders
- Easy channels for communication provided; use of standard forms for consistency, but also the option to make a verbal complaint (by interview.)
- Written in plain English (no jargon) translations available where required.
- Non-threatening; assistance offered where needed

### ***Legitimacy***

- Transparent governance of the Mechanism to prevent bias
- Ultimate resolution through independent processes including mediation
- No conflicts of interest in the procedures
- Transparency of process guaranteed

### ***Responsiveness***

- Attentive to complainant's needs
- Commitment to careful listening & accurate documentation (checked back with complainant)
- Timely processing (timeframe specified; e.g. 14 days for resolution)
- Progress updates provided to complainant

## *Fairness*

- Respectful engagement with complainant(s) on equal terms
- Guarantee of a ‘safe’ process.
- Confidentiality\* is offered unless a third party is involved.
- Rejection of complaints are appealable.
- Appropriate redress for complainants (e.g. apology, recompense etc.)

\*Note: ADRA does not accept anonymous complaints. The organization guarantees confidentiality and a safe process, including for whistle-blowers. In return, ADRA expects complainants to take responsibility for their complaint.

## **V. Governance and the Complaints Handling Mechanism**

The Complaints Handling and Response Mechanism is an ADRA International Policy and is owned by the ADRA International Board. It applies to the whole of ADRA, which provides global consistency and protects the reputation of ADRA around the world. Complaints from donors, partners, communities, humanitarian beneficiaries and other stake-holders are responded to by the Management of ADRA, either local, regional or global. While national Boards are not involved in handling complaints, directly, they will be kept informed of complaints against ADRA and any redress offered at least annually.

Where a complaint against the Head of a Country Office is serious, the Board should be informed and where necessary should take disciplinary action. Where a complaint is raised against the Board, or an individual Director, the International Secretariat may need to intervene, the operating principle being that those being complained about do not judge themselves.

## **VI. Promotion of the Complaints and Response policy to stakeholders**

ADRA will promote the Complaints and Response Policy prominently on the home page of its Global website with an online response mechanism for people wishing to register a complaint.

National Country Offices will have a link to the International page containing the Policy. Non-English speaking Country Offices will carry the Policy in the national language.

Program staff will ensure that partners and beneficiaries are aware of their right to make a complaint, using communication channels appropriate to the context, including community based monitoring processes to address concerns. (See Annex 1.)

## **VII. Management of complaints in ADRA**

ADRA will ensure that there are properly trained designated Complaints Officers to manage complaints in accord with the principles outlined in this policy. Their role is to make recommendations on the complaint and further steps to their manager.

Designated Complaints Officers will be appointed in Country Offices, Regional Offices and the International Secretariat. Complaints will be managed at the Country Office level with appeals escalated through the Regional Officers and ultimately the International Secretariat. A final forum for appeal will be managed by either an independent Ombudsman or an Independent Panel (tbd.)

At the conclusion of a complaint response, whatever the outcome, the handling Officer will ensure a brief but timely Action Review to ensure that lessons are learned from the process and communicated appropriately either within the Country and Regional Offices, or globally.

## **VIII. Procedures for accepting and responding to complaints**

### **1. Making a complaint**

- Complaints can be made in writing or verbally to the Complaints Officer using a standard form.
- Written complaints will be acknowledged within 5 working days and an explanation of the process will be provided, with an estimated time-frame for resolution.
- Complainants will receive a copy of the Complaints Policy.
- Complainants will be treated respectfully at all times.

### **2. Processing a complaint**

- The Complaints Officer will interview the Complainant unless this is impossible due to location in which case phone/skype will be used.
- All complaints will be taken seriously as per this policy. A complaint will only be deemed frivolous or vexatious with the agreement of the relevant senior manager and communicated in writing to the Complainant.
- Interviews and verbal complaints will be written up and checked back with the Complainant.
- The Complaints Officer will seek whatever additional information is required to make a recommendation, including legal advice both on content and process.
- In certain circumstances ADRA will refrain from responding if it is felt that it is adding oxygen to a conflict. In some situations, a public complaint may be deemed to be defamatory and require a legal response.

### **3. Accepting a complaint**

- The Complaints Officer will determine whether a complaint is accepted or rejected, and make recommendations to his/her manager.
- The Complainant will be informed in writing of the outcome and of any redress that may be offered (apology, change to programs/advocacy financial recompense, etc.)
- The complaint should be recorded using an agreed format.
- The Complaints Officer *should identify lessons* resulting from the complaint. Such lessons learned should be communicated to the local manager and copied to the appropriate person in the International Secretariat.

### **4. Rejecting a complaint**

- If, on the basis of evidence gathered, the complaint is rejected, the Complaints Officer should check legal implications and make recommendation to his/her manager on managing the process.
- The Complainant should be informed in writing (and verbally where careful communication is required,) including information about their right of appeal and offer of mediation.

### **5. Mediation**

- Mediation will be offered where appropriate. ADRA will identify a range of suitable independent mediators.

### **6. Appealing a decision**

- Complainants who do not accept the rejection of their complaint and who do not accept Mediation can ask for an Appeal, outlining reasons in writing and using a standard form.
- Appeals will be dealt with through an escalation from Country Office Complaints Officers to Regional Complaints Officers. Complainants will be interviewed on their grounds for Appeal where necessary.

### **7. Mediating conflict**

- If a complaint is rejected and the Complainant wishes to Appeal, s/he may be offered mediation using an independent mediator.
- The intention is to reduce the conflict and stress in a given situation but not to diminish the right to make a complaint or to Appeal.



## **IX. Whistle-blowers**

Whistle-blowers may make confidential complaints to the Ombudsman (or Independent Complaints Panel) directly, by-passing the various steps in the Complaints process. Whistle-blowers can include beneficiaries, partners and staff who have evidence of wrong-doing but are afraid to raise concerns because of fears of the consequences.

**X. Annex 1: Complaints Handling Mechanism and Response (CHMR) for primary stakeholders; partners, communities, beneficiaries.**

Effective promotion of the CHMR and capturing the lessons learned from responding to complaints is critical to programme quality. Whilst promoting the CHMR for donors, supporters and the general public can be web-based and relatively passive, the power imbalances in most development contexts require extra effort to ensure that beneficiaries are aware and feel empowered and safe to raise concerns and make complaints.

Without being prescriptive it is suggested that ADRA program managers look at outreach approaches, such as existing community mechanisms, village committees, women's organizations, use of mobile technology, and the creation of specific liaison committees that involve beneficiaries as equals. Involving beneficiaries in design of the feedback processes should be considered.

Where possible, ADRA can also make use of independent survey methodologies (e.g. using organizations such as Keystone Accountability) to get more objective data about programme quality. Whatever the mechanisms chosen they need to be culturally appropriate, safe and timely.

There needs to be a commitment to sharing learning from these approaches.

Complaints can be received locally, regionally or globally. They can be dealt with at any level but the principle is that they are dealt with where possible at the local/national level. Complaints become formal complaints if the Stakeholder has been unable to receive a satisfactory response from local ADRA with whom they interact.

Once a complaint becomes formal, Country Offices need staff (designated as Complaints Officers) with the capacity to handle this process at the country level, as well as regionally and in the Secretariat.

A final 'court of appeal' is provided to enable independent mediation, and resolution. This does not remove the possibility that a complainant may still take legal action although this is highly unlikely.

## XI. Annex: Complaint Flow Chart

