

Policy on Complaints and complaint handling

SEPTEMBER 2023, VERSION 2

1. Introduction – The value of complaints and our commitment to good complaint handling

Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA recognises the importance and value of listening and responding to concerns and complaints. We are committed to achieving the highest standard we can in every area of our work and to continuous improvement. This applies especially to delivery of services, seeking donations and accountability to stakeholders generally. We are committed to working according to or above the standard required by the Code of Conduct of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID). Receiving concerns and complaints is one of the most important ways of learning what we need to do to improve our work.

This policy applies to all our people - employees and volunteers – and they are familiarised with it. Those with particular relevant responsibilities are trained in its application.

We make clear the value we place on receiving concerns and complaints in all relevant communications.

We advise how a copy of this policy may be obtained and we provide clear information on how complaints may be made.

All senior staff, including Country Managers, International Program Manager and the Executive Officer hold responsibility for implementation of this policy.

2. Guiding principles for Our Policy

We have adopted the following principles for our complaint policy and procedures.

Principle 1: **Visibility**

We will clearly publicise information about how and where to complain, raise a concern or speak up.

Principle 2: **Accessibility**

We will ensure that our complaint handling process is as accessible as we can practically make it to all complainants. We will provide multiple ways in which you can contact us to make a complaint.

Principle 3: **Responsiveness**

We will let you know promptly that we have received your complaint. We will respond to a complaint according to how urgent or serious it is. If someone's safety or security is at risk we will respond immediately and escalate accordingly. We are committed to advising you:

- What will happen (the complaints process)
- When it will happen (the expected timeframes for our actions)
- How it is progressing (whether an investigation may take place, reasons for any delays and how you may be involved)

If we cannot deal with any part of your complaint, we will tell you (and if possible, we will advise you what you can do instead).

Principle 4: **Impartiality**

We will address all complaints with integrity and without bias using evidence submitted by both the complainant and our personnel through the complaint handling process. We will ensure that the person handling a complaint is different from any employee who is being complained about.

Principle 5: **Charges**

Access to the complaint handling process is free of charge to complainants

Principle 6: **Confidentiality**

We know people feel more confident about making a complaint if they know it will be treated confidentially. This means your identity (your name and other details) will not be shared, where possible and appropriate. It is also possible to make an anonymous complaint. Sometimes we need to share some information with other people. Confidentiality means we share with the minimum number of people, and only with people who need to know ('need-to-know' basis)

Principle 7: **People-focused and victim/survivor centred approach**

We prioritise the safety, rights, needs and wishes of all people whilst ensuring procedural fairness to all parties. We especially recognise the needs of those who are vulnerable or may be victims/survivors of harm. We will provide you with information about how we handle complaints. We will: treat you with dignity and respect; actively involve the you in decision making; provide you with comprehensive information; protect privacy and confidentiality; and where required assist you to access other support services including health or psychological services and address any immediate protection assistance, referral or rehabilitation. We are committed to gender equality and protecting vulnerable people.

Principle 8: **Accountability**

We will ensure that accountability for and reporting on the actions and decisions with respect to complaint handling is clearly established.

Principle 9: **Zero tolerance of retaliation or punishment**

We will take all reasonable steps to make sure that people making complaints are not negatively affected because a complaint has been made by them. In the case of someone making a complaint on your behalf (for example, a family member speaking up instead of you), we will do our best to ensure that you, and that person, are not affected.

Principle 10: **Continual improvement**

Continual improvement of the complaint handling process and the quality of services is one of our permanent objectives.

To this end we will:

- maintain data collection on complaints for the purpose of identifying trends for the purpose of enhancing information management and service provided;
- keep abreast of best practices regarding complaint handling;
- foster a people-focused approach, including those who may be victims or survivors;
- undertake specific training and retraining of staff to foster better complaint handling practices;

3. Definitions

Complaint means an expression of dissatisfaction made to an organisation, related to its products or services, or the complaint handling process itself, where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected.

Complainant means a person, organisation or its representative, making a complaint.

Inquiry means a request for information or an explanation.

Feedback means opinions, comments, suggestions and expressions of interest in the products or the complaint handling process.

PSEAH means prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.

Sexual exploitation means any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust for sexual purposes. It includes profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from sexual exploitation of another. (Source: the UN Secretary General's Bulletin on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.)

Sexual abuse means the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions. (Source: the UN Secretary General's Bulletin on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.)

Sexual harassment means unwanted physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature that can include indecent remarks or sexual demands

Stakeholder or interested party means a person or group having an interest in the performance or success of the organisation.

4. Scope of Our policy

This Policy is intended to apply to any complaint, regardless of who makes it.

We will accept complaints relating to our paid staff, our volunteers, our partner organisations, our Board members, our contracted service providers or anyone else acting on our behalf.

This policy applies to anyone who makes a complaint, regardless of who they are or how the complaint is made, including:

- People inside the organisation
- People outside the organisation
- Our program partners and participants
- Others who wish to make a complaint or report

This policy covers two main categories of complaints:

- General complaints
- Sensitive complaints

This policy does not cover:

- Enquiries about our work or requests for information (please email office@apheda.org.au)
- Requests to unsubscribe or be removed from our database (please email communications@apheda.org.au)

Anonymous complaints can be made, but obviously our ability to investigate them may be limited because of this.

5. Publicising Our Policy

We make clear the value we place on receiving concerns and complaints in all relevant communications.

Where literacy is a constraint we will orally invite expressions of concern and complaint on a regular basis. We will take care to give this invitation in a way that is culturally appropriate recognising that in some cultures people require greater encouragement to make a complaint. We will take special care to facilitate complaints from vulnerable populations including children and marginalised groups. If required we will make use of pictorial means of communication.

We ensure that making a complaint to us is as easy as possible. We will take complaints orally in person, over the phone and by any written means. We will do our very best to assist a complainant to put their complaint in writing or to write it down ourselves as faithfully as we can.

All relevant communications explain this and explain our procedures for handling complaints including:

- where or to whom complaints can be made
- information to be provided by the complainant
- the process for handling complaints
- time periods associated with various stages in the process
- the complainant's options for remedy, including external means
- how the complainant can obtain feedback on the status of the complaint

6. Where and How Complaints may be made

We are able to receive complaints orally in person or by telephone and in writing by post, email or online via our website. Where complaints are made orally we will ensure our write up of the complaint contains all the information the complainant wishes to provide.

Complaints may be made by a friend or advocate of the complainant on their behalf. Any APHEDA employee can receive a complaint. They may consult with their manager on next steps.

Where appropriate we may utilise complaint/suggestion boxes. We recognise that in some circumstances complainants may wish to remain anonymous. Because such complaints can alert us to problems that need fixing we will accept them though clearly it may not be possible to provide a remedy to an individual.

8. Types of complaints

8.2.1 A general complaint includes but is not limited to:

- Funding and program decisions
- Program implementation
- Fundraising and Supporter Services
- Conflict of Interest issues
- Employment issues including complaints or concerns about:
 - Safety or security within the work environment
 - Unethical behaviour
 - Unfair or unjust employment conditions

We support a culture of speaking up. If you are an employee and you have a complaint about employment issues, you should first speak with your manager or your union representative. If you feel your complaint is not being heard, it is appropriate to escalate it in line with this policy.

8.2.2 A sensitive complaint includes but is not limited to:

- Corruption
- Theft
- Fraud
- Misuse of funds
- Exploitation, including sexual exploitation
- Abuse in sexual abuse
- Harassment, including sexual harassment
- Bullying
- Discrimination
- Misconduct negligence
- Matters raised under the Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH) Policy and Child Protection policies
- Any other abusive or inappropriate behaviour by our personnel, partners or those involved in our work in-country
- Bullying, harassment or discrimination between personnel

Sensitive complaints will always be investigated by senior personnel.

Complaints that are made about another organisation and/or their personnel will be referred to that organisation. It is the responsibility of that organisation to resolve it under their own complaints handling mechanism.

9. How we will handle complaints

When we take an oral complaint we will:

1. Identify ourselves, listen, record details, and determine what the person wants;
2. Confirm that we have understood and received the details;
3. Show empathy for the person, but not attempt to take sides, lay blame, or become defensive.

For all complaints we will:

4. Seek from the person the outcome/s they are expecting;
5. Make an initial assessment of the severity of the complaint and the urgency of action;

6. Clearly explain to the person the course of action that will follow:
 - a. if the complaint is out of our jurisdiction;
 - b. if we may exercise a discretion not to investigate;
 - c. if preliminary enquiries need to be made, or further consideration needs to be given: or
 - d. if the complaint is to be investigated.
7. We will not create false expectations, but assure the person that the complaint will receive full attention;
8. Give an estimated timeframe or, if that is not possible, a date by which we will contact them again;
9. Check whether the person is satisfied with the proposed action and, if not, advise them of alternatives.
10. Ensure that the complaint is appropriately acknowledged;
11. Follow up where necessary, and monitor whether the client is satisfied.
12. We will register all complaints (see section 16)

Where appropriate we will ensure that personnel working in communities we serve have all necessary training to encourage and handle inquiries, expressions of concern and making of complaints so as to take account of cultural and gender sensitivities and to ensure that cases involving children are appropriately handled.

We will ensure that a complainant is not required to express their complaint to a person implicated in their complaint. We will also ensure that a person implicated in a complaint is not involved in any way with the handling of that complaint.

Initial assessment of complaint

We will first assess whether there is more than one issue raised in the complaint and whether each needs to be separately addressed.

To determine how a complaint should be managed, we will assess it in terms of the following criteria:

- a) severity;
- b) health (including mental health) and safety implications;
- c) financial implications for the complainant or others
- c) complexity;
- d) impact on the individual, public and organisation;
- e) potential to escalate; and
- f) the need for, and possibility of immediate action.

If we assess the complaint as significant in terms of one or more of these criteria we will classify the complaint accordingly.

We will abide by all mandatory reporting requirements. We are obligated in certain circumstances to report to authorities, such as law enforcement agencies, DFAT or ACFID.

10. Inquiries, minor complaints and jurisdiction

We will endeavour to deal immediately with inquiries and minor complaints which are made orally by telephone or in person, that is during the initial phone call or meeting. However, as far as possible, we will ensure that the inquirer or complainant is completely satisfied with the information and or resolution provided.

On receipt of a complaint we will also attempt to determine expeditiously whether investigation is required or not depending on jurisdictional questions and whether the complaint is ill conceived.

If the complainant disputes an assessment that a complaint should not be investigated, the member of staff handling the complaint will refer it to a more senior colleague for review. If such a dispute is unresolvable we will refer the complainant to Code Committee of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID)

11. How we will investigate complaints

We will make every reasonable effort to investigate all the relevant circumstances and information surrounding a complaint. The level of investigation will be commensurate with the seriousness and frequency of the complaint.

12. Our timeframes

We will acknowledge written complaints within 2 (two) days.

We will acknowledge oral complaints immediately.

We will aim to resolve complaints as quickly as possible and within 30 days unless there are exceptional circumstances. If a complaint is not resolved within 30 days we will inform the complainant of progress and keep them informed of progress every two weeks.

13. How we will respond to and close a complaint

Our Executive Officer or a senior manager delegated by him/her will normally make the decision on a complaint that has required investigation (that is not a minor complaint). Decisions on serious complaints may be referred to our governing Board.

We will communicate our decision on a complaint as soon as is practical. Our communication will be in writing in the appropriate language by email and/or post. However, where appropriate such as in the case of a complaint being made by a local community member (in the field) we will also communicate our decision orally and again in the appropriate language.

We will encourage the complainant to respond and advise whether or not they are satisfied with our decision. In our decision we will advise that if a complainant is not satisfied we will be prepared to consider any additional information they may provide and to review our decision.

In all cases we will advise that the complaint may be referred to the Code Committee of ACFID. We will provide all necessary information for referral to the Code Committee and offer to assist in referral.

14. How we will learn from complaints

We will ensure that all relevant personnel are informed of the outcomes of complaints and the implications for our services, goods, procedures and processes.

We will take all required remedial action. We will be prepared to change the way in which we operate and improve or undertake further training of staff. Where needed we will counsel or discipline staff or volunteers.

Where appropriate we will consult and take advice from ACFID and/or other relevant regulatory/enforcement authorities.

15. Confidentiality

We will not reveal a complainant's name or personal details to anyone in or outside our organisation other than staff involved in handling the complaint without obtaining the complainant's permission, unless there are legal or regulatory requirements for doing so.

16. Complaint data

We will register all inquiries and complaints. We will ensure that the following information is contained in written complaints and if not, and in the case of oral complaints, record this information ourselves:

- date of receipt
- a description of the complaint and relevant supporting data;

- the requested remedy;
- the service(s) and/or good(s) and/or practice or procedure complained about;
- the due date for a response;
- immediate action taken (if any) to resolve the complaint

17. Reporting about complaints

We will immediately escalate complex and/or major complaints (see 6) to our Executive Officer or his/her delegate.

All complaints will be reported at our regular Management Team meetings and our governing Board meetings.

All complaints received by Country Managers will be reported to project officers in regular quarterly reports.

Minor complaints will be reported in summary form. Major complaints will be reported in detail. An analysis will be included in the complaints report provided with the complaints data.

18. Continuous improvement and policy socialisation

On a continuing basis we will monitor the effectiveness of our complaint handling and make improvements as appropriate.

We will socialise policy regarding complaints handling through staff and Board induction and refresher training.

We support partners to understand the Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA policy and develop their own complaints mechanisms

19. Document control

Version	Revision Description	Approved by Board (date)
1	Original	20 June 2014
2	Updates to address new policy developments including in PSEAH. Expansion of sections 2, 3, 4, 8 to update for consistency with new approaches in complaints handling.	September 2023