

# **The Lutheran World Federation Nepal**

## **Community based complaint mechanism: An Experience**

LWF Nepal has been working with the poor and oppressed communities in Nepal to reshape their future and enable them to take charge of dignified lives. LWF Nepal provides humanitarian assistance and facilitates human development process following the generally accepted empowerment and human rights framework. LWF Nepal has been inspired and guided by its core value “accountability and transparency”, among several others, in its daily work. Hence, LWF Nepal has adapted organizational Accountability Framework that guides all LWF Nepal staff and Implementing Partners to uphold accountability to the highest standards. As one element of this Accountability Framework, LWF Nepal has set up community-based complaint mechanisms in all communities where LWF Nepal works.

There are a variety of community institutions (self help groups, community-based organizations, cooperatives, disaster management committees and several networks) that have practiced the complaint mechanism as an important function of the organization. Over 1,300 self help groups, 60 community-based organizations, 30 cooperatives and 100 disaster management committees have put up the complaint mechanism and made it functional. The complaint mechanism has been one of the tools to empower rights holders and community leaders to lodge complaints against staff of LWF Nepal and its Implementing Partners or on any operational matters. The mechanism has been receiving complaints and the complaint handling mechanism has dealt with it as per the set procedures. Each Implementing Partner has nominated one ‘Complaint Handling Focal Person’ and assigned him/her to handle complaints. The focal person has received orientation from LWF Nepal in the year 2011 and 2012.

At community level, the complaint boxes are being checked by the focal person every two weeks and the operational complaints are being discussed in every monthly meeting, while potential breaches of the Code of Conduct (complaints of a serious nature) are dealt within a small committee identified by the focal person. The complaint mechanism includes setting up complaints box in public places, providing instructions/guidelines to use the complaint mechanism, articulating the purpose and benefit of complaints, describing complaint registration system and procedures for providing feedback. A complaint mechanism has also been set up for group gatherings like trainings, workshops, retreats and any other events that bring people together for some duration, but not for short meetings. In these events LWF Nepal establishes a complaint box, nominates a complaint handling team comprising a member of the organizer and of the participating organization; briefly orient all participants about complaint handling system and the complaint box; open complaint box; register the case; take appropriate action, if any. Recently, LWF Nepal’s partner organizations also started this system and complaints received through this system have proven very effective for two reasons: firstly, they help empower the participants and make them feel safer than in the past; secondly, this mechanism has worked as practical simulation that provided an experience for the participants to use a similar system at community level activities.

Although LWF Nepal established the complaint mechanism a couple of years ago, the numbers of complaints have been increasing over the recent months. LWF Nepal has received mainly complaints on operational and management issues, but also a few complaints of a serious nature, mainly on breaches of Code of Conduct or SEA. LWF Nepal has registered all those complaints and passed them on to LWF Nepal Accountability Focal Person. All those complaints were handled as per the set procedures, including

investigations if necessary. These complaints have helped LWF Nepal to improve management systems and efficiency, including revision of some of the policies and the elaboration of new policies. Following investigations into serious complaints, LWF Nepal had to terminate the partnership with one of its Implementing Partners in 2011 and to terminate staff members in 2012.

LWF Nepal has found that the complaints boxes are useful instruments to improve accountability within and outside the organization. Such improvement can be seen from receiving actual complaints and its processing and settlement. Further, there is a positive attitude and psychological impact among the organizations and its leadership vis-à-vis the complaint mechanism. It has been observed in many instances that this has made organizations extra careful and sensitive towards their behaviors and actions. There is an increased sense that organization and the leadership may have to face public criticism and scrutiny if things are not done properly. We have found that this is the foundation of a culture of accountability.

On the other hand, complaints mechanisms are to be seen within the context and need to be contextualized to work well and produce the desired outcomes. For example, many people do not want to hurt others by putting formal complaints in the box and in so doing be perceived as the enemy of others. They rather tend to complain verbally either through face to face or telephone. Increasingly, LWF Nepal is receiving operational complaints verbally from stakeholders and rights holders by telephone. However, the practice of registering the complaint officially and to take immediate actions for the operational complaints is very new for the implementing partner level. LWF Nepal is placing much emphasis in strengthening its cooperation with partners to roll out the complaints mechanism on all levels.