

# ACTION AGAINST HUNGER CASE STUDY: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN MADAGASCAR



This case study documents two projects that Action Against Hunger are running in Madagascar. The first is the USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) funded multi-sectoral project and the second is the Comité Interministériel d'Aide Alimentaire (CIAA) funded cash distribution project.

Community engagement is central to the implementation and monitoring phases of Action Against Hunger's projects, but there is less community engagement in needs assessment or planning.

This research found that establishing strong relationships with both elected officials and communities was a key enabler of community engagement. Understanding the social and political power dynamics was also important as well as using a variety of communication methods. Barriers included lack of access to communities in geographically dispersed and remote rural locations.



## LESSONS LEARNT FROM MADAGASCAR

### *Examples of good practice:*

- An assessment to understand the power structures and dynamics within each community informed Action Against Hunger's engagement with communities and other key stakeholders.
- Recruiting local staff with previous experience in community engagement helped Action Against Hunger build relationships and trust quickly while working on short-term projects in new locations.
- Specific community engagement ('Mob Com') staff act as the key points of contact between Action Against Hunger and communities. They coordinate with other teams to ensure efficient delivery of multi-sectoral projects, as well as delivering awareness raising activities.
- Using a variety of communication methods (including leaflets, posters, community meetings and the availability of frontline staff) helped transparent communication with communities.

### *Future considerations may include:*

- Reducing the number of communities each Mob Com staff member is responsible for so that they can spend more time in each and build stronger relationships.
- Greater focus on communication with, and inclusion of, under-represented groups.
- More clarity around different feedback mechanisms and the role of community committees.
- Include or allocate additional funding in project budgets to support these future considerations.



| <b>Project #1: Multi- sectoral emergency response to the severe drought crisis in Southern and South-Eastern Madagascar</b> |   |
|---|---|
| <b>AIM</b>  | To improve the nutrition security of vulnerable populations in Southern and South-Eastern Madagascar  |
| <b>SECTORS</b>  | Health and Nutrition, Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and food security and livelihoods (FSL)  |
| <b>LOCATION</b>   | Manakara-Atsimo and Ikongo districts, Fitovinany region (plus several other regions across Madagascar)  |
| <b>OUTPUTS (targets)</b>  | <p>From the Manakara base, the project aims to support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Screenings, referrals, and psychosocial support for 1,900 children under the age of five; including nutrition-specific interventions</li> <li>- Training health workers (health staff and community workers) in care practices, psychological first aid, as well as supervision and delivery of medical and nutritional inputs to basic health centres</li> <li>- Rehabilitation of seven water points for use by the community</li> <li>- Agricultural technical support and seed distribution for 3000 households, including approximately 16,000 individuals, 2,800 of which are children under the age of five.</li> </ul> |
| <b>DURATION</b>   | 18months (August 2023- February 2025)   |
| <b>BUDGET + DONOR</b>   | 1.1m USD + USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)   |

| <b>Project #2: Prevention of acute malnutrition during the lean season in South-Eastern Madagascar</b> |   |
|--|---|
| <b>AIM</b>   | To improve the nutritional situation in the Fitovinany region affected by cyclones Emnati and Basirai   |
| <b>SECTORS</b>   | Health and Nutrition, FSL.  |
| <b>LOCATION</b>  | Manakara- Atsimo, Fitovinany region.  |
| <b>OUTPUTS (targets)</b>   | <p>From the Manakara base, the project aims to support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Transfer of cash to 2,500 households with a pregnant or breastfeeding woman and/or a child aged six- 24 months old (approximately 12,500 individuals) for four months corresponding with the lean seasons (September-October 2023 and January-February 2024).</li> <li>- Awareness-raising on good feeding practice for infants, young children and pregnant women in order to optimise the use of the amount transferred for nutritional purposes.</li> </ul> |
| <b>DURATION</b>  | 12 months (May 2023- April 2024)  |
| <b>BUDGET + DONOR</b>  | 800,000 EUR + Inter-ministerial Food Aid Committee (CIAA)   |

This publication forms part of a series of case studies that explore community engagement across several Action Against Hunger projects, programmes or initiatives. Action Against Hunger welcome wider sector engagement- if you are interested in collaborating or learning more please reach out to: [MEALServices@actionagainsthunger.org.uk](mailto:MEALServices@actionagainsthunger.org.uk)

## 1.0 CONTEXT

**Madagascar has a diverse and largely rural population.** Madagascar is home to approximately 30 million people<sup>1</sup> with around 80% of the population living in rural areas<sup>2</sup>. Most of the land is used for pastoral purposes to grow rice, cassava and other crops for household consumption and for sale at market<sup>3</sup>. The official languages are Malagasy and French. However, there are many local variations and dialects of Malagasy and only about 25% of the population speak French. The population consists of 18 main ethnic groups<sup>4</sup> for whom life in the countryside remains traditional, both in its lifestyle and political framework, with many decisions being made by male elders<sup>5</sup>.

**Many Madagascan people experience poverty.** About 70% of the population lives on less than US\$1.90 a day<sup>6</sup>. Around 20 million people are without electricity<sup>7</sup> and more than 80% of domestic fuel needs are supplied by wood and charcoal<sup>8</sup>. 60% of the population is under the age of 25<sup>9</sup> and Action Against Hunger states that average life expectancy is currently 57<sup>10</sup>. Chronic malnutrition is prevalent, a situation that is further compounded by increasingly unpredictable climate patterns and environmentally damaging agricultural practices (e.g. 'slash and burn' techniques that contribute to top-soil erosion, flooding and landslide risk<sup>11</sup>).

**Humanitarian needs are increasing in Madagascar.** Since 2018, Madagascar has had prolonged droughts in the south of the country due to lower levels of rain fall causing food insecurity and malnutrition<sup>12</sup>. There have also been a number of cyclones, notably Batsirai and Emnati in early 2022 and cyclone Freddy in 2023 – damaging homes, infrastructure and crops. The World Bank<sup>13</sup> has highlighted that the prolonged drought is also causing social impacts, including increased gender-based violence (particularly towards women and girls), communal violence such as theft and cattle raiding, and migration. UNICEF also found that there was an increased number of children at risk of violence, abuse, and exploitation—including child marriage and child labour, due to the ongoing stress and economic pressure of the drought and slow economic recovery<sup>14</sup>.

**Action Against Hunger has been working in Madagascar since 2010 with a national presence of more than 400 staff, which makes it one of the larger Action Against Hunger country offices.** The organisation provides a wide range of assistance across different sectors, including: food security and livelihoods (FSL), Health and Nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and advocacy programmes.

**This publication explores the community engagement activities across two projects in Manakara, south-east Madagascar to gather the views of communities and Action Against Hunger staff.** These humanitarian projects are in response to the challenges people are facing from the cyclones and droughts mentioned above. Section 2.0 introduces the two projects: firstly, the BHA funded project and secondly the CIAA funded project. The three key research questions are: What were the enablers of Community Engagement and how did they help? (Section 3.0); What were the barriers to Community Engagement and how were they overcome? (Section 4.0); and what was good practice and possible future considerations? (Section 5.0).

### BOX 1: GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

- **Fokontany:** Lowest administrative level of the state, similar to 'village'.
- **Ampanjaka:** King within a Fokontany, or across several Fokontany.
- **Ray amin—dreny or Olobe:** Respected elders within a Fokontany
- **Tangalamena:** Heads or senior members of important local families, holders of customs and traditions.
- **Fady:** Customs or behaviour that are considered taboo (e.g. eating certain foods).

## BOX 2: WHAT IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

We asked what community engagement means for Action Against Hunger staff and the communities they work with in Madagascar. We also asked why community engagement was important.



Community Members

Community members highlighted that for them, **community engagement** was about **working together** – either combining efforts with other members of their own community or with external organisations such as Action Against Hunger. Examples of community engagement included participating in meetings, volunteering time to maintain or repair shared facilities such as water points or roads and helping others even if you yourself do not directly benefit.

People reported that community engagement was important because through their own efforts, and through working with external organisations, they could get themselves and their neighbours out of poverty. They flagged that without the engagement of the community members any project delivered in their area would not succeed. Also, volunteering gave community members access to training and other learning opportunities that were valued.

*'When the community are not convinced with the development [that] is proposed in their community, nothing will happen'*  
Community Member

In 2023 Action Against Hunger Madagascar launched their first Community Engagement Strategy and defined community engagement as *'the process by which [we] wish to build a constructive relationship for a participatory approach with the targeted communities (men, women and children) offering them the capacity to act for themselves, to organise, to develop and take ownership of projects, with dignity'* (Box 3). This definition was echoed by the staff who spoke of the importance of community engagement throughout the project life cycle. Staff described types of engagement, from informing communities about projects, to discussion and exchange of ideas, and co-responsibility in decision making. Staff noted that accountability was an important part of community engagement, and this focused on receiving and responding to feedback.

Action Against Hunger staff noted community engagement was important because it supported project delivery and helped the benefits to be sustained after the project ended (for example reduction in poverty and behaviour change, such as decreased gender-based violence). It reduced the risk of doing harm by increasing accountability to the community. Finally, it also helped keep Action Against Hunger staff safe because the community shared the security responsibility.

*'community engagement is about involving all people in how to carry out the activities, facilitating access for vulnerable people. ... it is to facilitate the safety of people, projects and ... make it easier to do in general'*  
Action Against Hunger staff member



Action Against Hunger staff

## 2.0 ABOUT THE PROJECTS

The BHA funded project has been running in the Manakara Atsimo and Ikongo districts since August 2023 and is due to finish in February 2025<sup>i</sup>. The project is being implemented in three communes, including one in the Ikongo district and two in the Manakara district, and will offer:

- screenings, referrals, and psychosocial support for children under the age of five
- training health workers (health staff and community workers) in care practices, psychological first aid and the protection, supervision and delivery of medical and nutritional inputs to basic health centres.
- improving access to drinking water through the construction and/or rehabilitation of water points for groups of households (and for the population as a whole)
- distribution of seeds and technical support for farmers.

The CIAA project has been running in Manakara-Atsimo, districts, since May 2023 and is due to finish in April 2024. The project has been delivered in five communes and project activities include<sup>ii</sup>:

- cash transfer of 160,000 Ariary (approximately 35 USD) per month for four months (during the lean seasons, September-October 2023 and January- February 2024)<sup>iii</sup> to pregnant or breastfeeding women, or mothers of children aged six- 24 months old,
- monitoring the nutritional status of children under the age of two during the cash transfer through growth monitoring and promotion,
- focus groups to strengthen knowledge and practices in care and nutrition to address the risks of malnutrition.

Both projects are being delivered by the Manakara base, which was established in March 2023. There are not dedicated 'project teams', for example a team to deliver the BHA funded project and a separate team to deliver the CIAA funded project. Rather, activities are delivered by all departments at the base and staff contribute based on their role and the project requirements (Figure 1). There are around 100 Action Against Hunger staff members in the Manakara base, and they are supported by the staff based in the head office in Antananarivo (e.g. Head of Departments and their Deputies).

Throughout the two projects different community engagement activities have been carried out to involve community members and leaders. These activities are detailed in Box 4 and include forming various committees, community meetings, feedback and complaints mechanism as well as regular and ad-hoc discussions.

### BOX 3: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Since around 2018 Action Against Hunger had started to develop and pilot their community engagement activities in the south of Madagascar and a Community Mobilisation team was established (Mob Com). Over this period the Country Director and staff working in that region were key in driving and advocating the development in the way that ACF Madagascar engaged communities. They were driven by a desire to improve project coordination and delivery (e.g. 'You can't have a different [member of] staff arriving each day [in a community], this is absurd').

The Madagascar Community Engagement Strategy was validated in 2023. It is seen as an important step towards recognising, defining and consolidating the specialist expertise in the Mob Com team.

<sup>i</sup> Funding was initially awarded in August 2022 for a 12-month programme located in a number of districts in the South of Madagascar. In August 2023 BHA approved an extension to the original project timeline (for 30months) and also to the scope of the project (now also including Manakara- Atsimo and Ikongo districts South-East of Madagascar) with associated budget increase.

<sup>ii</sup> A number of the Fokontany are the same as the ones for the CIAA funded project, with an overlap of around 6-8.

<sup>iii</sup> In 2022, mass screenings of all children were carried out in the Fitovinany region by UNICEF, MSF, and ACF and the 5 to 7 communes (sub-districts) where acute malnutrition was found to be very high (>15%) were prioritised for support. Within each of these sub-districts, the project has taken a blanket approach, whereby 100% of households who have members who are either pregnant woman or breastfeeding woman and/or children aged 6 to 24 months receive assistance.

## BOX 4: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

| Project stage                 | Details   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Needs assessment and analysis | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mass screenings of all children in Fitovinany by Action Against Hunger, UNICEF and Médecins Sans Frontières<sup>iv</sup>.</li> <li>• Limited discussion or dialogue with community members or leaders<sup>v</sup>.</li> </ul> <p><i>Wider stakeholder coordination and data sharing:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploratory mission conducted by Action Against Hunger staff in October-November 2022 (head office staff as the Manakara base was not yet established). Discussions and coordination with government officials and humanitarian agencies.</li> <li>• Review of secondary data</li> </ul>   |
| Planning                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposal developed by the Antananarivo based team (e.g., Heads of Departments etc.) as Manakara base not yet established.</li> <li>• Analysis and use of secondary and primary data (from mass screening) by Action Against Hunger staff to include in proposal.</li> <li>• No project planning or design with community members or leaders.</li> </ul> <p><i>Wider stakeholder coordination:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National and regional coordination with government and humanitarian agencies (e.g. the Fitovinany health District and the nutrition cluster).</li> </ul>  |
| Implementation and monitoring | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project locations identified by the Action Against Hunger staff in the Manakara base (prioritisation of areas with a high prevalence of acute malnutrition and in consultation with other stakeholders, see below)</li> <li>• Introductory meetings with community leaders (Fokontany Chiefs, traditional authorities and others).</li> <li>• Introductory meeting with community members.</li> <li>• Action Against Hunger asks the community to identify and select volunteers to become committee members (e.g. organising committee, water point committee or complaints management committee)</li> <li>• Action Against Hunger field staff carry out household profiling and verification to confirm who is eligible to receive assistance.</li> <li>• Action Against Hunger confirm which households are eligible to participate in the project.</li> <li>• The list of beneficiaries is validated at a community meeting. The organising committee (alongside the Fokontany chief and the Mayor) then confirm the list.</li> <li>• Series of Community Meetings to provide a platform for discussion and feedback. For example, to discuss any issues arising from the eligibility assessment process.</li> <li>• Eligible individuals/households take part in project activities e.g., receive seeds or cash, attend awareness raising sessions.</li> <li>• Complaints management committee coordinate and facilitate feedback and complaints mechanism (e.g. complaints boxes and toll-free hotline number)</li> <li>• Regular and ad hoc discussions and opportunity to provide feedback to Action Against Hunger staff, primarily face-to-face.</li> <li>• Post-distribution monitoring survey and other monitoring activities carried out by Action Against Hunger.</li> </ul> <p><i>Wider stakeholder coordination and data sharing:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing coordination with governmental, humanitarian and other operational organisations working in the same settlements e.g., sharing data.</li> </ul> |
| Evaluations                   | <p><i>Current phase ongoing so no evaluation at time of research, however from the proposal, the following is planned:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation to be carried out by Action Against Hunger staff</li> </ul>  |

<sup>iv</sup> Funding for the screening was accessed through an existing project; the donor agreed to provide additional funds for screening.

<sup>v</sup> An Action Against Hunger staff member noted that Focus Groups were held with community members as part of the exploratory mission but we were not able to confirm who was spoken to and what was discussed. The focus groups are not mentioned in the project proposals and there was no mention of how these discussions were built upon to inform project delivery.

## 3.0 WHAT WERE THE ENABLERS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND HOW DID THEY HELP?

### Building relationships and establishing trust

Action Against Hunger had only been working in the Fokontany where the projects were being delivered for six to nine months. During this time significant efforts had been made to build a positive relationship and establish trust with the community members and leaders. Before starting to work within a Fokontany the Action Against Hunger team met with government officials within the wider Commune (Figure 2), for example the Mayor and the Police, to request introductions and to undertake research on locally sensitive issues (e.g. any 'fady' or taboos that are in place in the community). It is also during this first meeting that the project's objectives are set out. This is an opportunity to discuss how Action Against Hunger would like to carry out the project with the communities and to gather their feedback so that it can be incorporated into the project implementation approach.

Project delivery is structured so that the community engagement activities are coordinated with or delivered through frontline Community Mobiliser staff ('Mob Com'),<sup>vi</sup> who sit within the Mental Health and Psychosocial support (MHPSS) department (Figure 1). The MHPSS team have a wide range of responsibilities including behaviour change. These frontline staff play an essential role as the key contact between the community and Action Against Hunger. The Mob Com frontline staff deliver their own activities, such as awareness raising sessions about protection issues as well as supporting the delivery of other sectors activities. For example, helping the FSL team run community meetings about cash distributions or the mobile health teams establish a temporary clinic space.

Frontline Mob Com staff are recruited from the district and speak the local dialects of the communities where they work. They either live in or regularly visit and spend several nights in the commune assigned to them; they also spend time supporting colleagues in other locations (e.g. when there is a need for extra support, such as during cash distributions for large number of recipients). There are 16 frontline Mob Com staff, who work across both projects and they typically each work in around 10-20 Fokontany (however this number depends on a range of factors such as population size, geographical spread and access (see Section 4.0)). Staff in these roles are recruited for their previous experience of working directly with communities, mostly with other humanitarian agencies, and received further training on Action Against Hunger's community engagement approach.

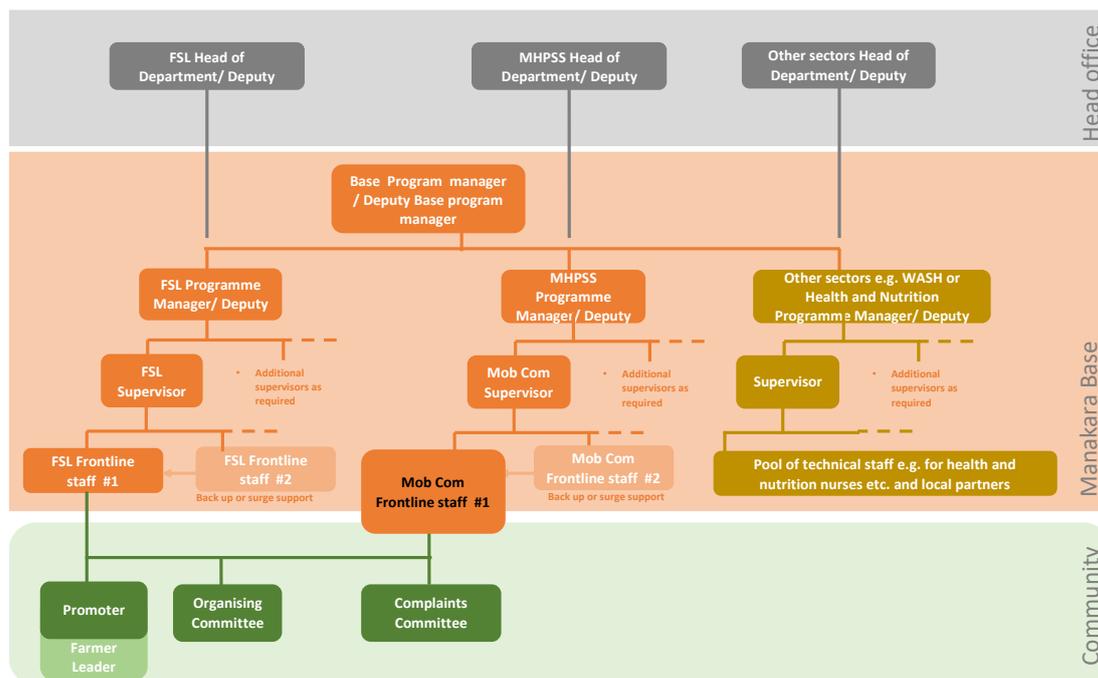
Mob Com, as part of MHPSS, is increasingly seen an area of technical competence, requiring specialist knowledge and expertise in Madagascar. The costs to delivery this are assessed at the design and planning stage. This has been further supported by the launch of the country's Community Engagement strategy in 2023 (Box 3). However, the team report they are continuing to work towards establishing clear requirements for frontline Mob Com staff, as it is a central role.

Community members spoke positively of their relationship with the frontline Mob Com staff, who they described as approachable, transparent and responsive. The frontline staff make considerable efforts to position themselves as part of the community. For example, one told us that from the first meeting they said: *'you should consider us as part of your community- not with distance'*.

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<sup>vi</sup> The Mob Com Frontline staff are called 'Animateurs'; which translates as 'Facilitators'

Figure 1: Staffing model and interface with the community- summarised across both projects



## Social and political power dynamics

Before starting work, Action Against Hunger carried out a ‘social and cultural diagnostic’ assessment to understand the social and political structures and the cultural norms. This assessment then informed the action plan on how to approach and work with a community to deliver the project.

In Madagascar, state and traditional governance systems operate simultaneously and the relationship between the two is complex and interdependent (Figure 2). Each region has its own custom and practices, but in the districts where the CIAA and the BHA funded projects are being delivered there are important traditional authorities include an ‘Ampanjaka’ (a king, this status is inherited by male family members), ‘Olobe’ or ‘Ray aman—dreny’ (male elders), ‘Tangalamena’ (male clan heads) and spiritual leaders. These traditional authorities are usually the key decision makers in the ‘Fokonolana’, a state sanctioned and locally legitimate council. On the governmental side, the Fokontany is the lowest administrative level, and can be a set of hamlets, villages or neighbourhoods. The Fokontany is governed by a Fokontany Chief and their deputy; they are selected by senior government officials (District Head or Mayor) <sup>5</sup> from a list of names provided by the ‘Fokonolona.’

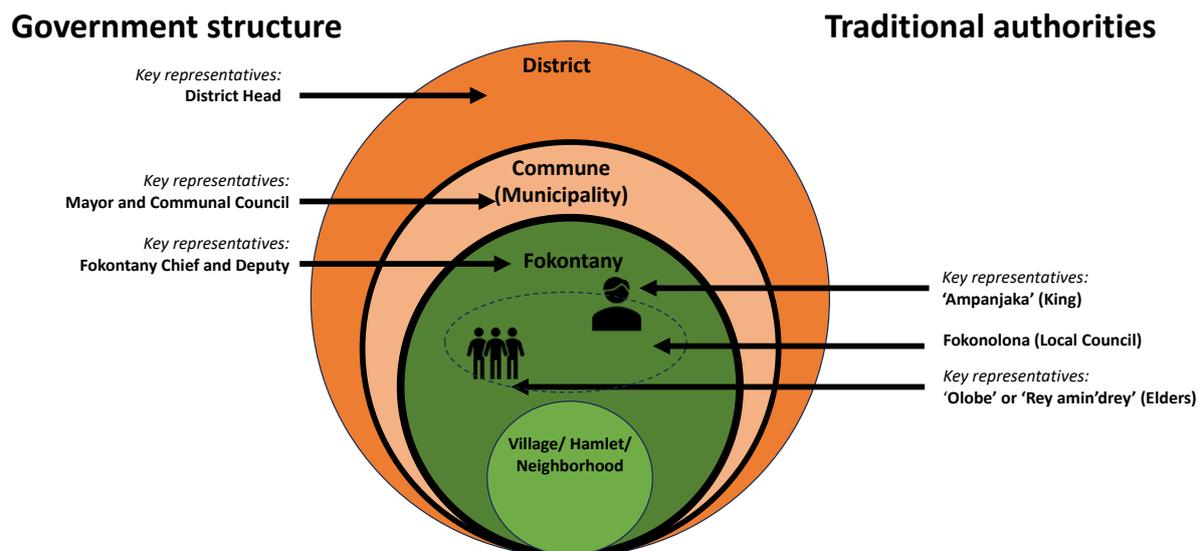
The initial assessment and subsequent action plan ensured that these community leaders were approached respectfully, with introductions to the right people in the right order. As many of the Fokontany where the projects are being delivered are very traditional, rural communities and the king is revered. Without the support of these leaders, particularly the king, the projects would not have been accepted and it was essential to pave the way to build relationships and trust with the wider community.

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*‘It is important to work with the traditional government structures, with the ‘Ampanjaka’ [king] and the ‘Tangalamena’ [clan heads]. They have more power than the Fokontany. If you engage them people will come more and will listen more.’ Action Against Hunger staff*

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Figure 2: Diagrammatic representation of community structure



Within these existing social and political structures there is limited representation of key community members, specifically women and vulnerable groups. Action Against Hunger recognise this challenge and have developed approaches that are culturally acceptable but that provide opportunity for a wider range of voices to be heard. For example, women can become members of the various project committees or are recruited as FSL Promoters (Figure 1). Action Against Hunger staff have also designed ways to mitigate the risk of established community leaders acting in their own self-interest, for example through ensuring the process of establishing and verifying the people who are eligible for assistance is transparent and followed directly.

### Communication methods available

Action Against Hunger have invested in a variety of communication methods with residents of the Fokontany where they work; this included regular meetings with committees, community wide meetings, feedback boxes and a toll-free phone number. As mentioned above, the frontline Mob Com staff also regularly spend time within the community and are available for discussion. For example, they informally attend community gatherings such as football matches. This range of different communication methods is standard across Action Against Hunger projects in Madagascar and were outlined in the proposals written at the outset of the project.

At the introductory community meeting the different communication methods were set out. The Mob Com team:

- asked the community to identify five people to form the **Complaints Committee**.<sup>vii</sup>
- shared the **toll-free number** and later put-up posters around the Fokontany promoting it.
- distributed printed forms for people to write on and put inside the **feedback box**.

Following this initial session, the frontline Mob Com staff met with the newly formed Complaints Committee to deliver training and to pass on the feedback box and additional forms. Typically, the Complaints Committee decide on the location of the feedback box, and position it in a safe, accessible spot.

<sup>vii</sup> The requirements of the committee members are to be able to read and write. The selection process for the committee varies from Fokontany to Fokontany- for example some are selected by the village leaders, whereas in other locations individuals can volunteer for the role and be voted in.

Figure 3: Different communication methods available (Left to Right; suggestion box outside committee member house; poster promoting feedback mechanisms and feedback form)



Many people in the communities do not have a phone and there are high levels of illiteracy. There are additional challenges with the toll-free number, for example different spoken dialects and varied requests that require detailed understanding of the contexts and projects, which can lead to misunderstanding or confusion for the call receivers. These are significant barriers to engagement with the communication methods, and it is the role of the Complaints Committee to bridge this gap. For example, people reported going to committee members to ask to use their phones (if they have one) or to help complete the feedback forms. Because of this, staff highlighted concerns around accessibility and confidentiality (as the Complaints Committee could influence or filter the feedback), but also noted that the range of different channels meant that there were alternative methods of communication.

Both the feedback box and the toll-free number were well used for feedback, complaints and words of thanks. For example, in one month on the CIAA funded project, Action Against Hunger received around 1000 individual pieces of feedback. When providing feedback, community members are asked how they would like to receive a response, for example if they have a phone number that they can be reached on. Some community members reported receiving responses to their feedback, whilst others were still waiting after several months.

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*In the event that the project had done things that did not meet social norms, or it did not respond to ... [the required] standards that should have been done ... it's a way for communities to challenge us, to share their point of view... If they need it. Action Against Hunger staff*

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Action Against Hunger staff supported the full range of different communication channels and recognised the importance of the toll-free number and the feedback box for accountability and safeguarding. However, they also highlighted that managing all the channels was challenging as it took considerable time to receive, process and respond to the information received from the feedback box in order that it could be actioned. For example, as explained in Figure 3, letters were received and treated at the base, in order for the seriousness of complaint and relevance of project, most were shared and then discussed with relevant departments, except for high-sensitive/confidential matters. From the community's perspective, there is no hierarchy of channels, but from Action Against Hunger's it would be preferable for non-sensitive, operational queries to be addressed directly by the frontline Mob Com staff. This would result in on-the-spot feedback to community members and more efficient use of staff time.

## Few other organisations working in the same locations

Action Against Hunger are the first humanitarian agency to work in many of the Fokontany where the two projects are being delivered. A small number of the Fokontany had previous experience engaging with other organisations a few years ago, but there is no ongoing relationship. As such, this reduced any challenges associated with mismatched expectations between what Action Against Hunger was proposing to deliver and what the community expected- both in terms of assistance and in terms of how that assistance was delivered<sup>viii</sup>.

Staff and community members reported high levels of motivation to engage with Action Against Hunger; for example, community leaders and members gave their time to support project delivery and meetings were well attended. In some instances, community leaders or those in volunteer roles (e.g. committee members) who were not eligible for assistance had requested financial or in-kind compensation. Action Against Hunger listened to this feedback and responded with some or all of the following points to encourage continued engagement:

- emphasising that the eligibility criteria was there to ensure that the funds went to the people who needed it the most (and that they could not be diverted).
- reiterating that Action Against Hunger needed to deliver assistance transparently.
- outlining that even if the volunteers themselves did not receive compensation directly, the project would help the wider community, including their families and neighbours.

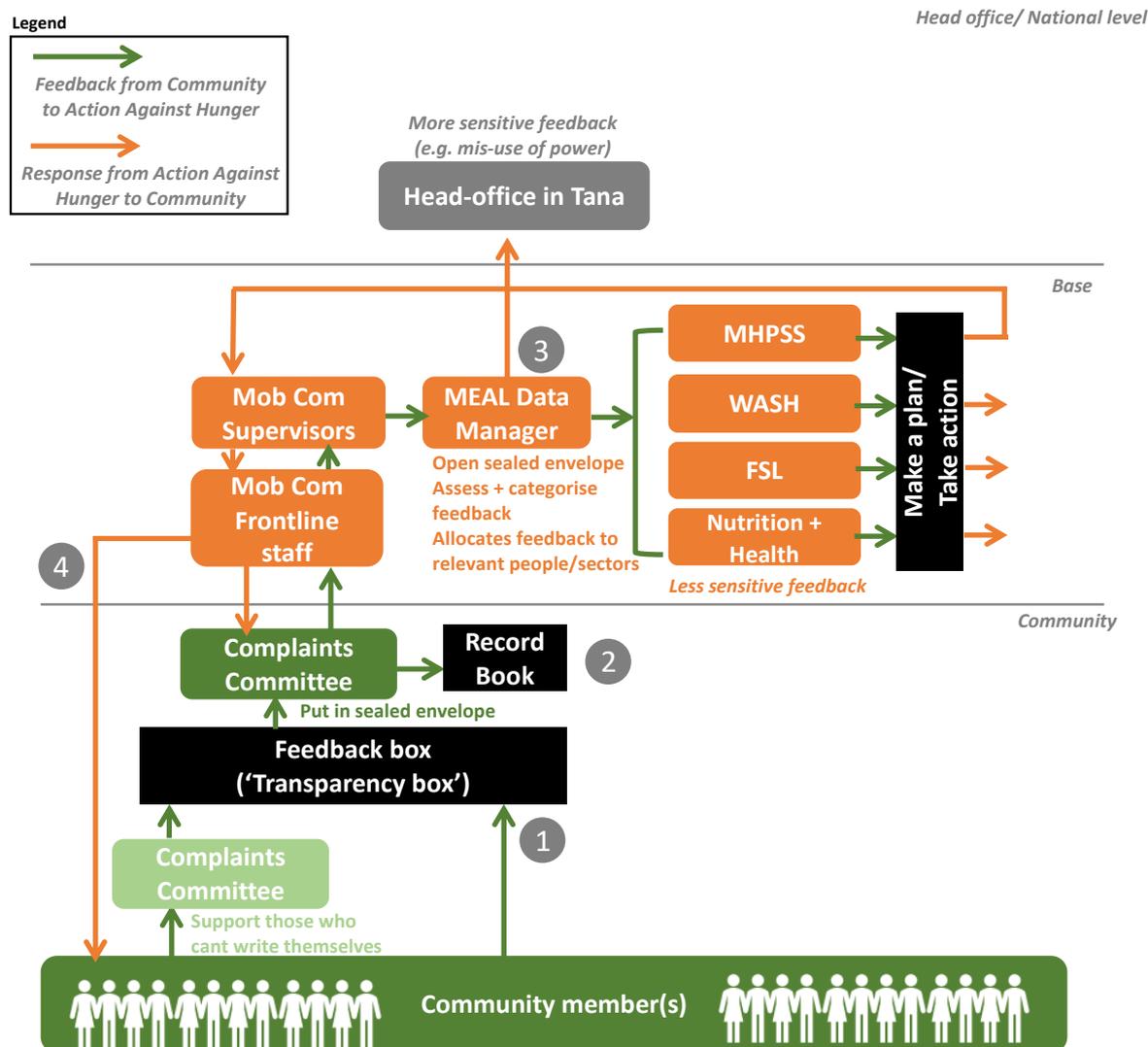
## BOX 5: THE VALUE OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Community members and Action Against Hunger staff alike spoke of how important the community's knowledge was to the success of the project. For ensuring the assistance met the needs, for acceptance, for security of staff and community, and for efficient delivery. Community members expressed confidence in their own knowledge and told us: *[Action Against Hunger] are the visitors here, we are the hosts, of course visitors know less than the hosts'* and *'we know our people best'*. Community members we spoke to felt that Action Against Hunger respected the information they had shared and had acted on it, giving examples of respecting *fady*, scheduling of community meetings and engaging traditional leaders: *'[Action Against Hunger] always encourage us to say what we want. They listen to us.'*

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<sup>viii</sup> A situation that can be described as 'consultation fatigue'

Figure 4: Feedback box- flow of information between the community and Action Against Hunger



- 1 Community members write directly on the feedback form and put it in the box (or if they need any assistance they ask the Complaints Committee to write it on their behalf)
- 2 The Complaints Committee open the box and write the feedback into their Record Book. They then put the feedback forms into a sealed envelope and pass it onto the Mob Com frontline staff (or any other Action Against Hunger staff who are visiting), who then pass it onto their Supervisors until it reaches the MEAL Data Manager.
- 3 The MEAL Data Manager opens the sealed envelope and assesses the feedback to determine a) the level of sensitivity and seriousness and b) the sector to whom the feedback relates. The most sensitive feedback gets sent directly to the Head Office (e.g. corruption or safeguarding concerns). Less sensitive feedback gets allocated to the programme directors and their deputies, who then discuss with their wider team to develop a response.
- 4 The Mob Com frontline staff pass on responses to the Complaints Committee and directly to the community via meetings and one-to-one conversations. It was not possible to confirm if responses from all the sectors are communicated through the Mob Com staff, or just the ones that related to their activities (e.g. the responses to the feedback allocated to them by the MEAL Data Manager).

## 4.0 WHAT WERE THE BARRIERS TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND HOW WERE THEY OVERCOME?

### Access to and within Fokontany

The Fokontany where the two projects are being delivered cover a large geographical area. The main roads are paved and in good condition, however once off these primary access routes the roads are unpaved and are poorly maintained<sup>15</sup>. During the rainy season many of the unpaved roads become impassable due to flooding and erosion. Some of the Fokontany or the villages can only be accessed on foot or by boat. Action Against Hunger staff have access to vehicles, but within the communities where they work people mostly travel by foot. It takes Action Against Hunger staff a long time to travel and between Fokontany. This puts additional pressure on staff and reduces the amount of time they can spend delivering activities.

Action Against Hunger highlighted that this barrier is overcome in a number of ways. For example, it is important to consider travel time when allocating Fokontany to the frontline Mob Com team, so the staff with the greatest distance to travel are responsible for a smaller number of Fokontany. As noted they also spend several nights in each location to minimise travel time.

The Mob Com team has also advocated for community members, leaders and government officials (e.g. the Mayor) to build or repair access routes into communities. Action Against Hunger has been successful in catalysing action and resources to improve bridges, roads and paths in several Fokontany.

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*'We have to look together with the community for the solution ... we are going to negotiate with local authorities to get the river crossing and we are going to ... find solutions'* Action Against Hunger staff

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### Security

In general, the region has low security risks. However, robberies are possible, and there are concerns about 'dahalo' (thieves in organised gangs) who carry out attacks either on slow moving vehicles on poor quality roads or within the Fokontany. To overcome this barrier Action Against Hunger staff highlighted the importance of establishing good relationships and building trust with the community and their leaders (Section 3.0). Through these associations and acceptance into the area, the risks of attacks were managed. Practical actions included holding meetings in the Fokontany Chief's house and explicitly stating that it was the responsibility of the community to help keep staff safe. Also, for areas only accessible on foot, a representative from the community came to accompany Action Against Hunger staff to ensure they travelled safely.

## 5.0 GOOD PRACTICE AND POSSIBLE FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS?

### Building relationships and establishing trust

Good practice highlighted through this case study included:

- ✓ **Establishing key points of contact between the community and Action Against Hunger.** The frontline Mob Com staff member plays a critical role in establishing trust between the community and the organisation. They also support with efficient communication and project delivery for multisectoral projects.
- ✓ **Delivering project activities with frontline Mob Com staff.** As well as their community engagement responsibilities, frontline Mob Com staff have operational delivery activities (e.g. MHPSS related awareness raising). This additional purpose is complementary to their facilitation activities as it gives them additional contact time and opportunities to build relationships.
- ✓ **Building in additional capacity and flexibility in the team by allowing for Frontline Mob Com staff to support colleagues in other locations.** Whilst maintaining their key contact, the communities become familiar with a wider number of Action Against Hunger frontline Mob Com staff. Long term this can help support transitions between frontline staff who are the guardians of these important relationships.
- ✓ **Recruiting staff from the region with previous experience of community engagement.** Employing local staff supports building relationships as they have the necessary language skills and a deeper understanding of social customs. Previous experience in a similar role enables them to quickly establish themselves- critical on short term humanitarian projects.
- ✓ **Coordinating between different sectoral staff.** As most of the project is delivered through or in parallel with the frontline Mob Com staff this requires high levels of cross-sectoral coordination at all levels of the organisation. Teams channels, regular meetings and oversight from the Field Coordinator / deputy play a key role.

Future considerations may include:

- **Reducing the number of Fokontany that each frontline Mob Com staff member works in.** If the budget is available, the fewer Fokontany that is allocated to the frontline staff allows for additional time to build relationships.

### Social and political power dynamics

Good practice highlighted through this case study included:

- ✓ **Undertaking an assessment to understand the power structures and dynamics within a community prior to starting work.** This assessment can then form the basis of a clear plan for community engagement, including a strategy for approaching a community and delivering the project- considering and mitigating for risks, and understanding the local legitimacy of the leaders.
- ✓ **Establishing good working relationships with local traditional leaders and government officials.** Identifying and working with respected leaders who are accepted by the community is essential to be accepted to work in an area and forms the foundation of the relationship with the wider community.

Future considerations may include:

- **Continuing to explore how to include groups who are less represented by the existing community governance structure.** For example, women and other vulnerable groups can join project committees, but there is no current requirement for the committees to have women or those eligible for assistance on them.

### Communication methods available

Good practice highlighted through this case study included:

- ✓ **Establishing and promoting a range of communication methods.** Different communication methods suit different individuals, and there will never be a one-size fits all option as communities are not homogenous. Putting up posters, ensuring frontline staff are available and visible and handing out leaflets helps establish the foundations for transparent communication.
- ✓ **Holding open community meetings with clear and transparent information about the projects.** Open access meetings where all members of the community are welcome to attend and contribute— can play an important role in transparent communication of project aims, objectives, processes, as well as provide opportunity for discussion and feedback. Meetings are held in safe locations and

scheduled at a time that suits community members so it does not clash with other responsibilities (e.g. market day).

Future considerations may include:

- **Unpacking the importance of language to indicate intent.** Some of the key mechanisms in place include a 'Complaints Committee' and a 'Feedback Box', the latter as also called a 'suggestion box' or a 'transparency box'. Naming these mechanisms to focus on the aim of them might be helpful to manage expectations and establish a hierarchy in the way they are used (e.g. to steer more sensitive issues towards the box). Is the Committee focussed on complaints, or is it about communication, collaboration etc.
- **Exploring opportunities for the Complaints Committee to play a role in the community.** Currently the Complaints Committee, and indeed the organising committee (Figure 1), only purpose is to support the delivery of the Action Against Hunger project delivery. Once the project is finished they no longer have a function. Is there an opportunity to build on this new capacity and develop a terms of reference for the committees that can be sustained?

### Access to and within Fokontany

Good practice highlighted through this case study included:

- ✓ **Securing lodging for frontline staff to move between Fokontany and have access to appropriate transport.** Frontline staff spend several nights within the Fokontany where the project is being delivered. They have access to vehicles that reduces their travel time and helps them work efficiently.

### Security

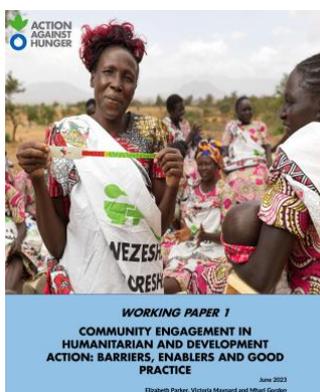
Good practice highlighted through this case study included:

- ✓ **Securing protection from local leaders.** Acceptance into the community by the leaders is essential for project delivery. It also helps support the safety of Action Against Hunger staff as they sit under the protection of the local leaders.

## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

The aim of this report is to gather the views of communities, local partners, and in-country Action Against Hunger staff to document barriers and enablers to community engagement and capture good practice. The research was led by Elizabeth Parker and Victoria Maynard from stet with the support of Action Against Hunger's UK Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning team.

*Other related publications:*



## RESEARCH METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

The research followed an embedded case study design. Case study research is particularly appropriate when investigating a complex contemporary phenomenon (such as a humanitarian or development project or programme) in depth and within its context. This case study methodology included triangulation of findings using multiple sources of evidence, establishing a clear chain of evidence linking data, analysis and findings, and having the draft case study reviewed by key informants<sup>16</sup>.

A two-person research team undertook data collection during a two-week period of fieldwork February-March 2024. The fieldwork included 36 key informant and group interviews and direct observation. In total 85 people were engaged in the research. This included interviews with Action Against Hunger staff (23 interviews) and community and civil society members (13 interviews, groups of 3-7 people).

Key informants were identified by the Action Against Hunger in-country staff and sought to engage a wide range of stakeholder groups to capture different perspectives. Data collected through direct observation included visiting a Fokontany during a cash distribution activity and tours of the communities. Initial findings were reviewed in a workshop with Action Against Hunger in-country staff and later combined with an extensive literature review in order to triangulate the data and refine the findings. Data were collected through digital recordings, comprehensive notes and photos.

This research applied the Department for International Development ethical guidance for research, evaluation and monitoring activities<sup>17</sup>.

Informants were provided with an 'information sheet' prior to the interviews and requested to sign a 'consent form' or give oral consent to indicate their understanding of the research and giving their permission. The diverse perspectives of key informants on Action Against Hunger's work were analysed using frameworks identified in an initial phase of research<sup>18</sup> alongside textual descriptions, tabulation, and clustering.

Each interview was given equal weight. In order to verify personal accounts, interview data were triangulated with direct observation and secondary documentation. Finally, five key informants reviewed the draft case study to check the accuracy of the findings and to ensure that no key data were missing. Interviews were carried out in French, Malagasy (including local dialect) and English; the research team included a French native speaker. The interviews in Malagasy were undertaken by interpreters and these interviews took longer due to the need to translate and consequently less detail was noted. The data from the interviews with translators was compared to the wider data set and it was found that the main findings were aligned.

Finally, the researchers who undertook the analysis had no previous relationship with Action Against Hunger Madagascar.

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# ACRONYMS

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| <b>ACF</b>     | <i>Action contre la faim</i> (Action Against Hunger)       |
| <b>FSL</b>     | Food Security and Livelihoods                              |
| <b>MEAL</b>    | Monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning       |
| <b>MHPSS</b>   | Mental Health and Psychosocial Support                     |
| <b>Mob Com</b> | <i>Mobilisation Communautaire</i> (Community Mobilization) |
| <b>MSF</b>     | <i>Médecins Sans Frontières</i> (Doctors Without Borders)  |
| <b>Nut</b>     | Nutrition and Health                                       |
| <b>UNICEF</b>  | United Nations Children's Fund                             |
| <b>WASH</b>    | Water, Sanitation and Hygiene                              |

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