



HOW CAN RESEARCH INSPIRE AND BE INSPIRED BY COMMUNITIES? CAPTURING BEST PRACTICES FROM THE MAM'OUT FEEDBACK MECHANISM IN BURKINA FASO

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HOW CAN RESEARCH INSPIRE AND BE INSPIRED BY COMMUNITIES? CAPTURING BEST PRACTICES FROM THE MAM'OUT FEEDBACK MECHANISM IN BURKINA FASO

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INTRODUCTION: DISSEMINATING RESULTS TO COMMUNITIES

Most of the time, community participation is prioritised during the needs assessment or implementation and monitoring phase of the project cycle, but rarely at the learning, dissemination or uptake phases. This is not only true for operational programmes, but also for research projects implemented in the field. The objective of this article is to present an innovative mechanism of feeding back findings to research participants, implemented in the framework of the MAM'Out research project,¹ and to discuss the opportunities and challenges linked to these participatory feedback sessions, in order to ultimately improve the quality of this new mechanism.

The MAM'Out project aimed to evaluate the effects of unconditional

multi-annual cash transfers for the prevention of acute malnutrition for children. It was implemented in 32 rural villages in eastern Burkina Faso from June 2013 to November 2015. In line with good ethical and research practices, the research team returned to all the villages in April 2017 to thank participants for their involvement in the project, communicate the final research results,² and gather their feedback on what could have been improved in order to achieve better outcomes on the prevention of acute malnutrition.

THE RESULTS FEEDBACK PROCESS

The feedback sessions followed a two stages process. The first stage was a gathering of all the 32 heads of villages and one key member per community. The main results of the MAM'Out project were presented and

discussed. The research team took the opportunity to discuss the results with participants and exchange on areas of improvement for future cash transfer programmes (based on the MAM'Out experience) or adjustments which could contribute to improving impact on the prevention of child acute malnutrition. During the second stage, 32 village gatherings were organised. The two village representatives who participated in the first meeting introduced the results to the entire village community, ensuring a participative approach to feedback. The two village representatives were supported by a MAM'Out officer, who detailed findings and led a group discussion that explored similar questions to those discussed during the first meeting. In addition, one interview with a mother of a malnourished child took place in each village to explore in depth some of the

1 More details available in the published research protocol (Tonguet-Papucci et al, BMC Public Health, 2015)

2 Please refer to the scientific publications for more details on anthropometric and morbidity results (Houngbe et al, J Nutr, 2017), food security results (Houngbe et al, Public Health Nutr, 2018), food consumption results (Tonguet-Papucci et al, J Nutr, 2017) and results on the use of cash and the changes induced by the project (Tonguet-Papucci et al, BMC Public Health, 2017).

subjects discussed collectively. All the group sessions and individual interviews in the villages were audio-recorded (after obtaining either global or individual informed consent in each village) to be analysed later.

This was the first experience of providing feedback to research participants at the end of a research project which was carried out within Action Against Hunger field operations.

WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM THIS PROCESS?

Several strengths/good practices can be highlighted:

- The feedback mechanism was welcomed by the local population and highly attended. Not only was it valuable for people to receive a flyer of key findings translated into the local language, but the feedback we received was that they were happy to discuss and exchange on the research results and consult on ways to improve programmes.
- Sharing results is key to engaging more actively with communities in the identification of problems and solutions tailored to the reality of their lives. It goes beyond being an ethical requirement for Action Against Hunger's research and reinforces our commitment to accountability.
- The feedback mechanism provided an opportunity to improve our understanding of social and cultural dynamics, barriers and perceptions within communities.

- Ensuring the feedback is inclusive of all genders enriched the conversation, and reminded us that the entire community (men and women) should be invited to participate in the discussion even if the research did not focus on them. In this case, cash was only transferred to women, but men were also invited to the feedback meetings and provided interesting and different perspectives from women.

In spite of these strengths, several challenges remain:

- Training the MAM'Out officers to conduct these sessions (including providing clear interview guides, translated into the local language) was essential, as moderation skills are key to collect useful responses. However, having a member of Action Against Hunger staff to moderate the discussions can ultimately create biases in the answers and opinions expressed. Using an independent sociologist or external facilitator could be an interesting alternative.
- In some villages, the research team faced difficulties interpreting the multiple dialects spoken. The need for translation capacity should be anticipated.
- Big groups can be challenging to handle, especially during outdoor discussions. A microphone would have been helpful to guarantee everybody could clearly hear. Moreover, the bigger the group was, the more difficult it was for the moderator to encourage everyone to participate. The moderator must ensure that they engage with as many participants as possible.
- It was challenging to get people to sign the attendance sheet and to collect individual consent for the audio recording. This was for two main reasons: many attendees couldn't read or write, and the high level of participation (50-100 people per village) meant that gathering consent from individuals would be very time-consuming. Instead, we asked the village leader to sign on behalf of his community.
- Although highly instructive and valuable, sessions like these are time consuming. It requires preparation, time to implement, time to transcribe, translate and analyse feedback, and ultimately time to use and share lessons learned.
- Feedback sessions take place once the research is finished, data analysed and results published. It can therefore be challenging to engage teams on the uptake of community feedback, since many staff may have moved on to another programme or organisation. Teams should anticipate this process during the programme planning stage.
- Funding for the uptake of the results of feedback mechanisms needs to be budgeted from the beginning of the project.
- Finally, yet importantly, implementing these sessions for research participants requires strong support from the country programme.

WHERE DO WE NEED TO GO NEXT?

Using feedback from communities remains challenging, as research findings are not

More information on the methodology is available in a capitalisation report. A full report analysing participants' feedback is also available. Check out our video presentation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52472uOb1AI&feature=youtu.be> or contact sstern@actioncontrelafaim.org to receive the reports.

Cover:

A community feedback session in Burkina Faso

available until after the project is complete. Agility and anticipation are therefore required to ensure that learning from communities is incorporated into existing or new programmes. Reflecting in advance on how community feedback will be taken up is key to guaranteeing that it is used efficiently in strategic planning and programming. This can be facilitated by responding to a few key questions. What do we expect from these learnings and how do we plan to take advantage of them? Who is responsible and accountable for championing them? What do we want to change, how do we support and implement change, and how do we monitor it?

Research therefore needs to be better embedded in strategic planning and programming. A research project shouldn't be considered finished when results are published; only half of the job is done at that time. Researchers need to be backed up by knowledge brokers and practitioners to move beyond research and transform observations and evidence into informed action. True change will only occur through strong integration between research and programmes and a strong will to learn, unlearn and relearn.

EVALUATION TRENDS: MOVING BEYOND THE OECD/DAC CRITERIA

(LEARNING REVIEW 2017)

The value of embedding rigorous and timely evaluations into programme cycles is now almost uncontested across the sector. With this, as explored in the previous articles, comes an ever growing push to fully embed MEAL at every stage of the programme cycle, to constantly improve our best-practice guidelines and approaches, and to ensure that communities are at the centre of MEAL. Action Against Hunger's approach to evaluations is constantly evolving, and our aim is for the evidence and recommendations from our evaluations to be used systematically to improve current programming and inform future programming. For a more detailed overview of how evaluation approaches are changing, and how this relates to adaptive management within Action Against Hunger, please refer to the 2017 Learning Review (page 54)

→ https://knowledgeagainsthunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/LearningReview_Final_lowres.pdf