

ALINE's Farmer Voice Workshop – Summary Report

21st January 2010

Introduction

ALINE's Farmer Voice Workshop, held on 21st January 2010 at the Institute of Development Studies, UK, brought together a small expert group to discuss the question: *"What can we do to help agricultural development agencies improve how they collect and use farmer feedback across their programs?"* It built on ALINE's current analysis, available at www.alineplanning.org.

The 19 participants included senior managers, leading academics, proven innovators and a professional from the commercial customer satisfaction industry. Further details and presentation notes are also available.

The workshop came to five conclusions:

1. Feedback from farmers can play an important role in improving projects and empowering farmers.

Agricultural development organisations can generate powerful data by asking farmers for feedback on their work. Acting on this data, organisations can make mid course corrections so their work is more relevant to different farmers' priorities. The process can also build local ownership of joint activities. Feedback is directly in line with core principles of 'empowerment' and 'accountability to the poor'.

Feedback should be an entry point into deeper dialogue and learning with farmers. This links it to the wider governance agenda of holding government and other service deliverers to account – and to political engagement. It can provide a way of proving NGOs' claims that they are close to farmers; and increase job satisfaction among staff; and be powerful in lobbying for changes in policy. There are important ethical considerations in collecting feedback and considering voice, for instance around representation.

2. Proven methods are available for agricultural organisations to collect and use feedback.

The workshop discussed innovations including the Livelihood Assets Status Tracking (LAST) method and Frontline-SMS.

LAST builds on the tradition of participatory monitoring & evaluation. It involves working with local communities to identify contextually specific criteria across five standardised categories (e.g. physical assets). The standardised categories are all rated on a performance scale of 1 – 100. Rapid household surveys can generate comparable data, based on peoples' own perceptions. Frontline-SMS is free software which allows quick and easy two-way communication by text. With a laptop and a mobile phone, users can broadcast the same text to many recipients. Replies can be automatically processed. It is being used for feedback in many different projects around the world. Many other feedback methods have been developed. (Some examples are described on www.alineplanning.org)

The workshop heard about best practice from the commercial sector, including:

- Asking specific and unambiguous questions using customers' language and concepts,
- Generating only data that will be used and seen to be used about issues that the organisation can influence,
- Building a culture of improvement and customer focus within the organisation.

3. Feedback methods are not widely used and farmer voice is rarely realised. There are strong disincentives against strengthening farmer voice.

As a sector, we seem to be stuck at the stage of running pilots. There is a limited culture of learning and innovation within development organisations.

Drawing on wide-ranging practical experience, the workshop identified the following factors which inhibit farmer voice and the collection and use of feedback data:

- Project based restricted funds are often short term, with fixed activities and objectives, and limited opportunities for learning and adapting activities.
- Staff's major incentives are to spend budgets on time, in line with proposals – not to generate data on what may not be working.
- Organisations can continue to raise funds without robust evidence of their performance on the ground.
- Mistakes may be seen internally more as threats to relationships with donors than opportunities to learn and improve.
- Social research systems tend to use complex methods and unfamiliar languages. They also tend to be expensive.
- A great deal of data is collected in the field but not acted on. Research results may take too long to be useful for decision making.
- Field staff are often very busy and may lack specialist social research skills.
- Staff performance reviews may not be consistently based on performance in relation to farmer voice and field work.
- Staff turnover.

There are parallels with barriers to using customer feedback in the commercial sector, which are overcome by demonstrating the link between feedback data and profit. Leadership is also critical.

4. The current system for allocating funds and reporting performance is stable and dysfunctional.

Funding is not directly linked to reliable data about performance: it is more driven by claims, relationships and reputations. Actual performance varies substantially. There is no consistent way to describe or compare it. As it stands, the system does not require change: 'business as usual' is an option, for organisational survival. Priorities are driven more strongly by donors than farmers. Farmers are not organised enough to assert their voice and demand change. (Farmer organisations are not yet strong enough to do this.)

5. An emerging agenda for change focuses on: leadership, changing incentives, creating simple methods and considering other ways to empower farmers.

The workshop considered what could be done to change the situation. Leadership was seen as a critical factor and possibly the most important factor. Innovations may happen more at the local level, with committed individuals, rather than in big organisations. It was noted that it will be important to consider how these issues play out in partnerships. On their own, exhortations to improve learning seem unlikely to create changes. Other practical ideas included:

- Change the incentives for managers and donors to collect and use feedback. Three potential approaches are:
 - o Lobby donors to require quantitative reports of farmer satisfaction (locally defined) and to reduce conflicting requirements. Start by working with internal reformers.
 - o Publicise and celebrate good practice in farmer feedback to generate peer recognition, describe benefits and inspire further innovations.
 - o Publish feedback data so performance can be compared between organisations. Independently rank organisations.

- Create easy-to-use and affordable methods which make life easier for busy staff. They should generate quantitative data for managers and qualitative data (e.g. stories or videos) for advocacy. Examples show how the demands of standardisation and contextualisation can be balanced. Use local media, like radio and SMS texts.

- Consider other ways of empowering farmers, such as individual cash transfers or a collective Farmers Fund or strengthening Farmers Organisations. Report data back to communities and use it to generate deeper dialogue and learning.

Next steps

The workshop substantially reinforced and validated ALINE's current analysis. During 2010 and beyond, we intend to pursue the debate and the emerging agenda for change. Over the course of the year, we will bring together and work with field partners to pilot feedback systems and learn more about potential solutions. We will support practical innovations and publish our learning as a resource for the sector.

Details are available at www.alineplanning.org. We would be delighted to discuss potential collaborations with anyone else working in this field. Please contact Caroline Davies and Richard Ponsford on info@alineplanning.org.