



Listen, Then Act: Why Feedback Mechanisms Are Essential in Earthquake Response

Lessons Sharing from Indonesia for Myanmar and the Region

In the urgency of disaster response, there's often one voice that gets overlooked — the voice of the very people we are trying to help.

As humanitarian agencies deploy aid, build shelters, and roll out services, it is easy to become so focused on delivering that we forget to ask: Is this what people really need? Are we getting it right?

Indonesia has faced countless disaster responses — from Aceh to Palu, from Lombok to Cianjur — and there's one consistent truth: **no humanitarian response is ever perfectly aligned with the reality on the ground at the start.** Needs shift, contexts evolve, and people's priorities change. That's why **feedback mechanisms are not optional. They are a foundation for effective, respectful, and adaptive humanitarian action.**

What The Earthquake Responses Have Taught Us: Nobody Gets It 100% Right

After evaluating dozens of post-disaster response programs across Indonesia, one clear insight stands out: **no agency delivers their intervention exactly as initially planned.** And that's not a failure — it's reality.

But the real failure happens when humanitarian actors don't listen, don't ask, or don't adjust. In West Sulawesi (2021), for instance, communities reported food aid arriving late, water and sanitation needs unmet, and shelter arrangements that didn't fit cultural norms. In many cases, the issues could have been solved — if only there was a system in place to hear and act on what communities were saying.



Figure 1. Radio programme can be one of the ways to collect feedback (Source: Indonesian Red Cross)

Feedback Mechanisms Are More Than Suggestion Boxes

True feedback systems are about two-way communication — not just collecting complaints, but creating space for dialogue, trust, and course correction. They are not about managing complaints but about strengthening relationships.

Indonesia's more successful approaches have included:

- **Community meetings and listening sessions** during distributions or shelter planning
- **Multiple channels** for feedback — verbal, written, mobile, anonymous — to reach different groups
- **Clear protocols** for reviewing and responding to feedback in a timely and respectful way
- **Visible action** — showing people how their input shaped programs (e.g., adjusted shelter layouts, added hygiene items, moved distribution points)

In Cianjur (2022), when feedback channels were set up early, organizations were able to address gaps in women's access to hygiene kits and adapt communication to better reach the elderly.

It's Not Just What You Hear — It's What You Do With It

Collecting data is easy. Using it is the real work. Feedback must feed into decision-making processes. Humanitarian organizations need to build internal systems — not only for collecting feedback but for analyzing, discussing, and responding with changes in design, delivery, and approach.

This also means shifting from seeing feedback as “reactive” to making it part of how we think, plan, and act.

A Call to Action: Make Listening a Core Competency

As Myanmar and other countries manage complex earthquake responses, it's time to move from assuming to asking, from delivering to listening. We call on:

- Humanitarian leaders to make feedback mechanisms a core operational requirement, not an afterthought.
- Policy makers to include community feedback and accountability in national disaster policies.
- Donors to require and support real-time feedback integration in projects they fund.
- All humanitarian actors to shift from being providers to partners — with affected communities as co-leaders in their own recovery.

Because the people we serve don't just need help — they need to be heard. And when we truly listen, we not only do better — we become more human in our response.

We welcome your thoughts.

This article is part of a series reflecting on Indonesia's experience in disaster response, aimed at contributing to shared learning and regional dialogue — particularly in the context of the Myanmar earthquake response. We warmly invite others to share their perspectives, experiences, and ideas.

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