



Complaints and Feedback

1. Introduction

AOA is committed to providing the highest standards in humanitarian, development, and advocacy work in a transparent and accountable way.

AOA strives to meet the expectations of all AOA People and local community members both in Australia and in countries in which we work. AOA acknowledges there may be times when these expectations are not met. In such instances people and organisations have a right to complain and have those complaints taken seriously and addressed in a professional and timely manner. AOA encourages all feedback.

2. Purpose and scope of the application

2.1 This Policy applies to all Board directors, committee members, employees, contractors, consultants, volunteers, interns, partners, supporters and prospective supporters visiting AOA programs, and officers of AOA. From here on, these groups will be collectively referred to in this policy as 'AOA People'.

2.2 This policy covers complaints in relation to the following:

- Complaints from or about AOA People or the organisation as an entity
- Complaints from or about AOA partners
- Complaints from AOA donors and supporters
- The documentation of incidents, and the management, reporting and investigation of complaints
- Locally-led community-based complaint mechanisms

2.3 Complaints not addressed by this policy:

AOA is not able to address complaints where we have no association with or authority to act in relation to the subject of the complaint. Complaints related to partner organisations' staff grievances, performance issues, employment, and labour matters are dealt with exclusively by partner organisations in accordance with local legislation

and their organisational policies and procedures. In such cases, AOA management will refer the complaint to the appropriate channels.

3. International and national frameworks

- The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) Code of Conduct
- DFAT PSEAH Policy

4. Guiding Principles

AOA supports the following principles in dealing with complaints:

- A “do no harm” approach. AOA will give priority to the rights, needs and wishes of the complainant while ensuring procedural fairness to all parties.
- Visibility. AOA will clearly publicise and promote information about how and where to make a complaint or report, including to partners and in communities in which we work.
- Accessibility. The complaints handling process should be as accessible as practicable to all complainants.
- Timelines. Complaints will be responded to in a timely way, according to AOA’s predetermined timeframes.
- Fairness. All complaints will be addressed in an equitable and unbiased manner using evidence submitted by both the complainant and AOA personnel through the complaints handling process.
- Cost. Access to the complaint handling process is free of charge to complainants.
- Confidentiality. AOA will observe strict confidentiality in complaint handling and investigation.
- Accountability. AOA will ensure clear lines of reporting on complaints.

5. Definitions

Complaint: A complaint is a formal expression of dissatisfaction or discontent, and/or misconduct, made by an individual or organisation internally or external to AOA about the standards of service, actions or lack of action by AOA People. A complaint requires a response. A complaint must be about an action for which AOA is responsible or which is within scope of its influence.

Complaints could include:

- Concern from someone with whom we work about the quality of program delivery
- Concern about the behaviour of staff, including abuse of power

A complaint does NOT include:

- A query about AOA’s work

- A request for information
- A comment not requiring any specific action or organisational response

Complainant: The complainant is a person, organisation or its representative, making a complaint.

Feedback: Feedback is any positive or negative informal statement of opinion about someone or something; an opinion shared for information but not with the intention of lodging a formal complaint. For example, if a supporter calls with a concern about the volume of fundraising requests they receive in the mail, this is classed as ‘feedback’. If the supporter wishes to lodge it as an official complaint, it must be recorded and documented in the complaints and feedback register.

6.Types of Complaints

6.1 Operational and sensitive complaints

Operational complaints may include questioning or objecting to issues such as geographic and sectoral priorities, strategic approaches, AOA policies, choice of partners, or adherence to programmatic policies and procedures. Sensitive complaints may include, but are not limited to, allegations of bullying, child protection incidents, sexual exploitation, abuse or harassment, fraud and corruption, terrorism financing or other forms of gross misconduct.

6.2 Anonymous complaints

AOA recognises that, at times, people who have genuine concerns cannot speak out because of

special circumstances and may wish to lodge a complaint about a specific person or issue without revealing their identity. Because such complaints can alert us to problems that need an investigation, AOA will respect the complainant’s wishes, however it may not be possible to provide a remedy to an individual in such circumstances.

6.3 Malicious complaints

AOA expects that all feedback and complaints are made in good faith. If an investigation finds that an accusation was deliberately made falsely with the aim of causing harm, the investigation will be stopped. Frivolous and vexatious complaints will not be investigated.

6.4 CAN DO

All work undertaken as part of the Church Agencies Network Disaster Operations (CAN DO) will follow the CAN DO Standard Operating Procedure for the inter-agency reporting mechanism. See CAN DO, Standard Operating Procedure.

7. Implementation

It is mandatory for all AOA People to report and document all communication regarding sexual assault, abuse, exploitation, harassment, criminal activity, or a child protection matter as a complaint. AOA will also document all misconduct incidents even if the management response is informal or assessed as a minor complaint, considering the wishes and welfare of the victim/survivor. Reports of this nature should be made in accordance with AOA's HR 28 PSEAH Policy.

7.1 Accessing the complaints mechanism

AOA's website includes a Feedback and Complaints link providing information on how to provide feedback, how to make a general inquiry or a complaint, and how to view this policy. Where literacy is a constraint, AOA will invite and receive complaints and feedback orally. In doing so, AOA will act in a way that is culturally appropriate recognising that in some cultures people require greater encouragement to make a complaint.

7.2 Sensitive complaints: child protection and sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment

If an allegation concerning any form of suspected or alleged abuse, exploitation or harassment against a child or adult is made by or brought to the attention of any AOA People, the complaints mechanism outlined in the HR 12 Child Protection Policy or HR 28 PSEAH Policy must be utilised. Any AOA People who fail to report suspected wrongdoing of this nature may incur disciplinary action.

All allegations concerning any form of child mistreatment, abuse, exploitation, or harassment, including any alleged breach of the AOA Code of Conduct, Child Protection Policy non-compliance or PSEAH Policy non-compliance by AOA People in Australia or during field visits will trigger an investigation. All investigations will be undertaken by an independent, external investigator. In-country reports (not related to AOA People) will trigger a risk assessment facilitated by AOA and the partner. The DFAT Post may be contacted for advice on preferred investigation options. This could be the police (if safe) or in-country consultants. AOA will ensure the partner's complaints handling system is activated upon receipt of the allegation or report, with regular updates from the partner to AOA on the investigation process and outcome to ensure consistency with AOA's due processes and complaint handling principles.

7.3 Sensitive complaints: bullying

If an allegation concerning any form of bullying is made by or brought to the attention of any AOA People, the complaints mechanism outlined in the HR 10 Bullying and Harassment Policy must be utilised. AOA commits to providing appropriate assistance to complainants by providing physical and mental health referrals and

offering to provide pastoral care. See relevant HR policies, including HR 21 Internal Grievances Policy and HR 9 Occupational Health and Safety. AOA is registered with the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) facilitated by Relationship Matters (formerly LifeWorks).

The EAP can be accessed by any AOA staff member anytime, confidentially and free of charge. Relationship Matters can be contacted via phone: 1300 543 396 or at <https://relationshipmatters.com.au/eap/>

7.4 Sensitive complaints: fraud and corruption

If an allegation concerning any form of suspected or alleged fraud, corruption or terrorism financing is brought to the attention of any AOA People, the complaints mechanism outlined in FA 18 Fraud and Corruption Control Policy or DP 13 Counter-Terrorism Policy must be utilised. Failure to report suspected wrongdoing of this nature may incur disciplinary action.

7.5 Grievances

If any AOA People have a grievance rather than a sensitive complaint against other AOA People the complainant should enact the reporting process as per HR 21 Internal Grievances Policy. AOA encourages this approach to resolving non-sensitive disputes among staff and colleagues.

7.6 Operational and Communication/Advocacy Complaints

AOA receives complaints verbally in person or by telephone and in writing by post, email or online via our website. Where complaints are made verbally, AOA will ensure the report clearly states all information the complainant wishes to provide.

Complaints may be made by a friend or advocate (but excluding a legal or paralegal representative) of the complainant on their behalf. AOA will take special care to facilitate complaints from vulnerable populations including children and marginalised groups. If required, the use of pictorial means of communication will be provided.

8. Taking a Complaint

If possible, the CEO or member of the senior executive team will take complaints. When taking a verbal complaint, the AOA staff member will:

- identify herself/himself, listen, record details, and determine what the complainant wants
- confirm that she/he has understood and received the details
- show empathy for the complainant, but not attempt to take sides, lay blame, or become defensive.

For all complaints AOA will:

- record as much information as possible using GOV 8A Complaints and Incident Reporting Form
- make an initial assessment of the severity of the complaint and the urgency of the action
- clearly explain the course of action where:
 - o the complaint is out of AOA's jurisdiction;
 - o preliminary enquiries need to be made;
 - o the complaint is accepted for investigating; or AOA decides not to investigate.
- not create false expectations, but will assure the complainant that the complaint will receive full attention;
- give an estimated timeframe, or if that is not possible, a date by which the complainant will be contacted;
- check the complainant is satisfied with the proposed action and, if not, advise them of alternatives;
- ensure that the complaint is appropriately acknowledged;
- provide ongoing and final feedback to the complainant;
- follow up where necessary, and monitor whether the complainant is satisfied;
- register the complaint in the Complaints Register.

AOA will ensure that a complainant is not required to express their complaint to a person implicated in their complaint. AOA will also ensure that a person implicated in a complaint is not involved in any way with the handling of that complaint. Some operational complaints, excluding sensitive complaints, can be resolved to the complainant's satisfaction through communication between the complainant and the CEO or delegated senior executive team member. Either of these two parties must decide if the allegation needs to be investigated. AOA will make every reasonable effort to investigate all the relevant circumstances and information surrounding a complaint. The level of investigation will be commensurate with the seriousness and frequency of the complaint. All misconduct complaints will be recorded, and actions taken in accordance with this Policy.

9. Assessment

All complaints, excluding those related to CP and SEAH will be assessed by the CEO or a member of the senior executive team (as delegated) who will decide if a complaint warrants an investigation. AOA will first assess whether there is more than one issue raised in the complaint and whether each needs to be separately addressed, accepted, or rejected. To determine how a complaint should be managed, AOA will assess the complaint in terms of the following criteria:

- severity;

- health (including mental health) and safety implications;
- financial implications for the complainant or others;
- complexity;
- impact on the individual, public and organisation;
- potential to escalate;
- the need for, and possibility of immediate action;
- the need to advise ACFID and/or DFAT.

9.1 Triage

If the assessment determines a complaint as significant in terms of one or more of these criteria, AOA will classify the complaint accordingly and the complaint will be immediately referred to the CEO and the Board. All complaints will be reported at fortnightly executive team meetings and at the next Board meeting.

Minor complaints will be reported in summary form, and major complaints will be reported in detail. The AOA Annual Report will provide de-identified information on complaints.

9.2 Responding to and closing a complaint

AOA will communicate the decision on a complaint as soon as practical.

Communication will be in writing in the appropriate language by email and/or post.

AOA will encourage the complainant to respond and advise whether or not they are satisfied with the outcome. AOA will advise that if a complainant is not satisfied, it will be prepared to consider any additional information the complainant can supply and may review its position.

In all cases complainants will be advised that the complaint may be referred to the Code Committee of ACFID. AOA will provide all necessary information for referral to the Code Committee and offer to assist in the referral.

9.3 Inquiries, minor (non-sensitive) complaints and jurisdiction

AOA will endeavour to deal immediately with inquiries and minor complaints made orally by telephone or in person; that is, during the initial phone call or meeting.

However, as far as possible, AOA will ensure that the complainant is completely satisfied with the information and/or resolution provided.

On receipt of a complaint AOA will also attempt to determine expeditiously whether investigation is required, whether it has jurisdiction, and whether the complaint is properly conceived.

If the complainant disputes an assessment that a complaint should not be investigated, the member of staff handling the complaint will refer it to a more senior colleague for review. If such a dispute cannot be resolved AOA will refer the complainant to ACFID.

10. Timeframes

AOA will acknowledge written complaints within five (5) business days and as soon as possible upon receipt, and no longer than 24 hours for CP and SEAH-related complaints. AOA will acknowledge verbal complaints immediately and aim to resolve complaints as quickly as possible and within 30 days unless there are exceptional circumstances. If a complaint is not resolved within 30 days, AOA will inform the complainant of the progress and keep them regularly updated until the matter is resolved.

11. Feedback

AOA will ensure that the complainant and all relevant personnel are informed of the outcomes of complaints and the implications for our services, procedures, and processes. AOA will take all required remedial action and will be open to change the way it operates and improve or undertake further training of staff where appropriate.

Where needed AOA will counsel or discipline staff or volunteers and will consult and take advice from ACFID and/or other relevant regulatory/enforcement authorities.

12. Confidentiality

AOA will not reveal a complainant's name or personal details to anyone unnecessarily. It may refer a matter to an external investigation to review a complaint, or to law enforcement authorities if it believes a crime may have been committed. All feedback and complaints will be registered in a secure Complaints and Feedback register. Where provided, and as per the wishes of the complainant, AOA will ensure that the following information is contained in written complaints:

- date of receipt of complaint;
- a description of the complaint and relevant supporting data;
- the requested remedy;
- the service(s) and or good(s) and/or practice or procedure complained about;

- the due date for a response;
- immediate action taken (if any) to resolve the complaint;
- in the case of verbal complaints, as much as possible of the above information will be recorded.

13. Continuous improvement

On a continuing basis AOA will monitor the effectiveness of its complaint handling process and make improvements as appropriate. AOA will maintain data on complaints for the purpose of identifying trends and enhancing information management and services provided. It will endeavour to keep abreast of best practices (both locally and overseas) regarding complaint handling and undertake specific training of staff to foster better complaint handling practices. AOA is committed to strengthening its culture of accountability and reporting; AOA staff in collaboration with partners will facilitate training in relevant reporting mechanisms.

14. Complaints procedures, partner organisations

Complaints by AOA People against an employee of an AOA partner, or against the partner organisation itself, will be referred to the partner's management or someone with delegated authority to handle complaints within that organisation. Complaints by an employee of an AOA partner or the partner itself, against any AOA People, or AOA as an entity, will be received and addressed using the processes outlined above. The AOA International Programs (IP) team will provide information to partners about this reporting and complaints procedure. The IP team will work with partners to contextualise and translate incident reporting and complaint forms including implementing community complaints mechanisms within projects accessible to members of the communities where activities are implemented.

Review

This policy and related procedures will be reviewed no later than August 2027, by the Finance Manager and CEO.