Client Voice and Choice / Ground Truth Solutions Pilots

Northern Greece, July to November 2016

Case Study – December 2016

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Dates of Pilot: July 2016—November 2016
Survey Dates: Round 1—July 18-20 2016; Round 2—September 26-28 2016; Round 3—14-17 November 2016

What is Client Responsiveness?

Client responsiveness is an approach to programming in which the IRC takes decisions and implements actions that are informed by the perspectives of the people we serve. Evidence suggests[1] that client-responsiveness is not only 'the right thing to do' for ethical reasons, but it also improves the effectiveness and efficiency of our programming. It does this by providing us with mechanisms through which to understand and act upon information related to the performance of our projects, and it contributes to building trust in the IRC and supports the empowerment of crisis-affected populations.

[1] CDA (Time to Listen), ALNAP-CDA Feedback Mechanism Research and Guidance, WV BFM Pilot findings, Andy Featherstone study (Save UK Christian Aid)

Summary of Key Learning from this Pilot:

- **Ownership, empowerment and accountabilities:** The M&E team played a key role in facilitating the collection, presentation and analysis of client feedback in the pilot. Going forward we recommend they continue to perform this function, drawing upon the information needs of programme teams. Programme Coordinators should be accountable and responsible for the interpretation of client feedback, and for taking decisions about how to respond to it. Alongside Senior Management, they also play an important role in communicating the value of client responsiveness to front line staff, and for modelling responsive behaviour by empowering front line staff to share the feedback that they hear from clients and their own feedback.
- **The feedback cycle as a management tool:** A decision about how to respond to client feedback is never taken in isolation of other information inputs: client feedback needs to be triangulated with, inter alia, contextual analysis, industry best practice and the programme team's own experience. Programme decision makers should think about ways to communicate the rationale for a decision to key stakeholders, including clients and front line staff, and they should consider ways to present contextual and programming information alongside client feedback so to contribute to the reader's understanding of client satisfaction.
- **Adapting the feedback channels to the context:** A feedback mechanism needs to be designed according to the individual programme and operating context in which it will be used. Given that this context will change over time, so the feedback mechanism should be adapted. In the Greece context, the clients whose feedback was being collected frequently changed; the government permissions and policies fluctuated; and the programme evolved both in terms of its activities and its staffing. This implies a need for changes to the data collection (what we ask, how we ask it and how often) as well as how decisions are taken about how to respond (which fora, at what frequency, by whom etc.).
- **Closing the loop:** The programme teams often struggled to adequately explain to clients how they were able to or had decided to respond to client feedback. Whilst there will always be a need to be sensitive about how explanation is done (either due to the reasons for the decision or due to the potential negative reaction from clients). However, this step is extremely important for creating trust between the clients and the programme teams – reflecting principles of respect and dignity in the way humanitarian agencies interact with affected populations – and ensuring that the feedback mechanism will continue to be used.

More detailed learning from the pilots can be read Parts 3 and 4.

Pre-Existing Responsiveness of the Programme:

The Greece country programme was established in 2015, and its activities in the camps in the North started in March 2016[2]. At the time of starting the pilot (in July 2016) the country programme did not yet have in place a comprehensive M&E system and team, and feedback from clients was not yet being captured systematically and deliberately. Feedback being received through open communication channels between clients and front line staff interacting with clients in the camps on a daily basis was being considered in programme decisions, but only on an ad hoc basis. At the point of starting the pilot, the programme would thus be identified as exhibiting a **poor level of responsiveness**, according to the draft Client Responsiveness Performance Matrix (available in Annex 3).

Improvements to the Responsiveness of the Programme Following Piloting:

Alongside the implementation of the pilot, the Greece programme also introduced an M&E system and brought in staff to support M&E activities in Northern Greece, including the collection, compilation and presentation of client feedback. The programme teams found the cross-programme team internal dialogue sessions (see "*Implementing the Feedback Mechanism—What We Did*") created a time-bound decision-making process, which enabled them to identify and plan for course correction.

However, throughout the pilot there was some reluctance amongst the programme staff to explain to clients why we weren't able to act upon certain pieces of feedback, given the sensitivities surrounding the myriad political reasons influencing the team's decisions and action. This meant that the teams didn't always satisfactorily close the loop with clients to explain what would be done and why.

Thus, with improved channels for data collection, and promising signs in the use of cross-programme decision-making fora for analysis and decision making, the responsiveness of the programme could largely be defined as **good level of responsiveness** according to the draft Client Responsiveness Performance Matrix. However, given the deficiencies in closing the loop, in particular, the Greece team should continue to strive for further improvements throughout the client feedback cycle.

Annexes to Reference:

1. Background on IRC's Commitment to Client Responsiveness
2. Background on Ground Truth Piloting
3. Client Responsiveness Performance Matrix (to be later surpassed by the Client Responsive Programming Framework)
4. Pilot Feedback Reports from the GT Surveys (3 rounds of externally collected data (pilot 6).

[2] The IRC first started activities in the informal Idomeini camp

Part 2: IRC's Programming and the Northern Greece Operating Context

Host Project Description:

The sixth CVC-Ground Truth pilot was conducted in Greece, where the IRC is responding in the context of the European refugee crisis to the needs of refugees. The pilot was run in four camps in Northern Greece – Alexandria, Diavata, Cherso and Gianitsa – where the IRC is providing services intended to meet the basic needs of refugees through providing water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services, and women's protection and child protection (only Alexandria and Cherso) services. The WASH services are provided to all refugees living in the camps, and the women's and child protection activities are provided to women / girls and children.

Over the course of the pilot, the populations in the camps changed quite considerably in number and in the refugees' countries of origin. Gianitsa camp was also closed between rounds 1 and 2 of the pilot. The table below summarises the minimum and maximum camp populations over the course of the surveys, and the nationalities of the camp residents:

Camp	Population Numbers	Nationalities
Alexandria	370-755	Iraq, Syria
Diavata	690-1,340	Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria
Cherso	280-1,553	Iraq, Syria
Gianitsa	0-460	Iraq, Syria

The camp activities are funded by ECHO and the Stavros Niarchos foundation.

Context Enablers to Responsiveness:

+ The Greece refugee response is well resourced in terms of relatively high numbers of experienced staff and capable staff. The ratio of IRC staff to clients is quite high compared to other contexts, enabling a close level of interaction and information flow between staff and clients.

+ The Greece programme had M&E staff responsible for supporting multiple programme teams within a specific geographic location (as well as centralised M&E systems and management). This provided the impetus and structure for the feedback cycle to be implemented.

+ Coupled with the human resources, the IRC Greece programme also has good levels of financial backing from donors, with relatively flexible grant agreements: this enables the financial resources to be able to respond to client feedback.

+ The refugee populations in the camps in which the IRC is working tend to be relatively well-educated: this provides opportunity to engage clients in meaningful discussions in informing our programming decisions. It also increases the likelihood that they would be able to share informed perspectives and to understand the operational constraints and implications of our programming.

Context Inhibitors to Responsiveness:

- The political context in Greece in which the IRC team is operating changes frequently, and decisions made at a regional level in Europe and at the national and local levels in Greece have significant implications for the IRC's programming. These external factors have often prevented the IRC team from being able to deliver activities as planned, and from being able to respond to client feedback.

- Given the challenging operating environment, staff turn-over in the IRC Greece team is relatively high. Further, during the piloting process almost none of the staff had previously worked for the IRC in other places, so the country programme lacked the institutional knowledge of the organisation's processes and ways of working. Further, given the staff turn-over and changing context, the topics which were identified as being important to seek clients' feedback on when the questions were first designed were not all felt to be relevant by the team implementing the programme come round 2 and 3 of the pilot.

- Whilst the majority of the camp populations are from Syria and, alongside the Iraqi population, speak Arabic as their mother tongue, there are also significant numbers of Kurds from Syria and Iraq speaking different dialects, as well as people from Afghanistan and a number of other countries speaking yet other languages. Finding a common language in which to communicate in the delivery of routine project activities and in conducting feedback exercises places a heavy burden on the few staff able to speak the languages of the camp populations. There is a risk of information from the IRC or feedback from clients being miscommunicated when channelled through so few people, or misinterpreted where language skills on either side are weak.

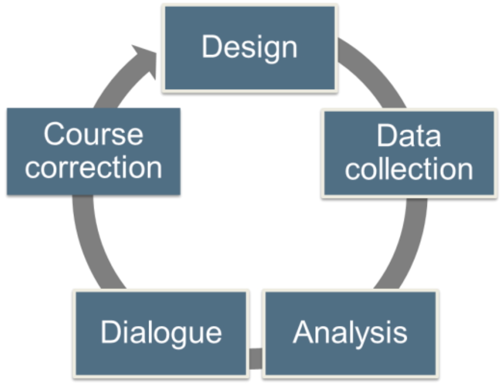
- Given that many of the refugees in the camps had been living in developed, urban centres of Syria, the living standards to which they were accustomed differed quite considerably to the Sphere standards for humanitarian response: this results in a significant disparity in levels of expectations from clients to the humanitarian industry standards for quality service delivery.

- Many refugees see Greece as a transit country and not their intended final destination: the motivation of clients to participate in feedback processes may thus have been more limited, as not all of them may have seen the value of engaging.

- The populations of the camps changed quite frequently, with clients being moved with little notice from one camp to another. This results in a sense of insecurity for clients as well as their being able to see the differences in services in one camp to another: this can lead to frustrations and reduced willingness to engage in a feedback exercise. It also meant that there were times when the team couldn't implement the feedback cycle steps as planned given challenges in access and appropriateness of raising certain issues.

Part 3: Designing the Feedback Mechanism: What We Did, Question Design and Lessons Learned

GT Cycle:



Description of GT Methodology:

Ground Truth's approach is to collect the views of affected people at regular intervals on key aspects of a humanitarian program, analyse what they say, and help agencies to understand and communicate the resulting insights back to affected communities. The objective is to provide agencies with real-time, actionable information from people at the receiving end of aid that can be translated into program improvements, while empowering people to express their views.

For further information of how we implemented these stages, see Annex 2.

Designing the Feedback Mechanism—What We Did:

Preparations: The CVC team and GT made a first visit to the IRC Greece country programme in April 2016, conducting initial workshops on feedback themes with the programme coordinators and management and M&E team who were at the time based on the island of Lesvos, where the bulk of the IRC's activities were occurring. CVC and GT also made a visit to Alexandria and Gianitsa camps in Northern Greece. Following consultations with the team, it was decided to focus the piloting activities in the four camps in the north where it was expected the bulk of the IRC's programming would continue.

Question Development and Testing: CVC and GT facilitated a workshop with staff in Northern Greece, which was attended by programme coordinators and managers for the WASH and protection programmes, as well as M&E staff, to discuss relevant themes around which the team wanted to collect client feedback. GT drafted questions on the basis of these discussions, which CVC, GT and the M&E team tested in Cherso with three groups of clients. During this testing process, we also asked clients whether there were any other topics upon which they wanted to provide feedback to the IRC. Based on the question testing, and subsequent remote exchange between CVC / GT and the programme and M&E teams, the questions were then finalised.

Designing the Feedback Mechanism—What We Learned in the Pilot:

Frequency of Surveys: As in a number of the other pilots, the programme teams fed back that they would have preferred to run the surveys less frequently: quarterly perhaps instead of every two months, or even every six months for some areas where change could not be implemented rapidly (for example, concerning infrastructure). When deciding upon the frequency of data collection, a number of things should be taken into consideration: how often the clients want to be consulted; how often we have the capacity to consult them; how rapidly the context and client needs are changing; and how quickly we would be able to act upon the feedback received. Whilst the Greece context is evolving very rapidly – informing our initial decision to run the survey every two months – and with some clients reporting in the final FGDs that they would like to be consulted monthly, the ability of the team to be able to respond to feedback was limited by the political environment; and also by the nature of some of the programming: whilst some aspects of the programming could be adjusted relatively easily and quickly, changes to infrastructure require significant additional budget and lengthy procurement processes. A balance thus has to be cast between the optimum frequency for data collection with the programme team's ability to act upon the feedback: not consulting clients often enough and consulting them too frequently both have negative implications for the programme's effectiveness and the teams' relationships with clients. Building upon the learning gained through implementing the Ground Truth approach, the team may now consider a mixed-methods approach to capturing feedback, with quarterly proactive solicitation of feedback, coupled with reactive channels which clients can routinely access, and of course, continued open dialogue between clients and front line staff. Alternatively, it is possible to ask questions more frequently, but rotate the questions used, so there is still enough time before repeating a particular question to implement improvements.

Closed Vs Open Questions: The GT methodology uses a combination of a limited number of closed questions, coupled with further analysis through dialogue / focus group discussions with clients. Whilst aggregated quantifiable data may be useful for country management, programme staff reported that they wanted more open ended questions in the survey. The GT methodology specifies that the internal dialogue process takes place following the survey and before the external dialogue when more qualitative information is obtained. Going forward, we would recommend that programme teams schedule a brief review of the survey reports to identify issues to explore further through the FGDs; and then set their action planning meeting only once they have both the survey data (quantitative data) and the focus group discussion analysis (qualitative data), to bring together the quantitative and qualitative datasets.

Adjust Questions to the Context: CVC and GT had provided a structure for question design based around seven themes which tend to be important for clients and programme teams to provide and receive feedback on, respectively. The programme teams that CVC and GT worked with in the question design identified specific questions that they wanted to receive feedback on which related to those themes. However, over the course of the pilot the context changed significantly – including the camp populations themselves – and there was quite some turn-over in programme management. The result of this was that at least one of the original questions were no longer found to be relevant come rounds 2 and 3 of the pilot, and thus certain questions were dropped, adjusted or others added in subsequent rounds (see "*Survey Questions and Themes for the Pilot*") Whilst this adaptive approach helped to capture relevant, actionable information, if substantial changes are made to a number of the questions, management cannot track changes in client satisfaction (in response to course correction) over time. An internal handover process on why questions were originally selected might have helped incoming staff feel more comfortable with the system they inherited.

Adjust the Feedback Mechanism to the Maturity of the Programme: The feedback mechanism was introduced to the Northern Greece programme early in its existence, before their M&E system was set up and whilst the programme was still being implemented with the support of temporary staffing from the Emergency Response Unit (IRC's roving emergency team). A lesson learned for the future is to design the feedback system in a way which reflects the maturity of the country programme: in this case a much lighter approach may have been appropriate in the early days of the response, changing to a more sophisticated mechanism as the programme was more fully staffed and with systems and structures for management in place.

Survey Questions and Themes for the Pilot:

1. **Relevance:** "*Do the IRC hygiene items (such as soap, shampoo and cleaning detergent) and the information provided help you to maintain your personal hygiene and your living area?*
2. **Service Quality:** "*Do you think that the work IRC is doing on the water supply, latrines, showers and laundry facilities has improved your hygiene conditions since you arrived at the site?"*
3. **Access:** *"Are all people in this site able to access these services when they need them?"*
    a. *Who cannot access these services when they need them?*
    b. *Why can they not access them?*
4. **Access:** *"Have you heard of or used the IRC spaces with activities for women and girls in this site?*
    a. *"Why have you not used them?"*
5. **Service Effectiveness:** "*Do you think that the IRC spaces with activities for women and girls improve the emotion wellbeing and / or skills of the women who attend?"*
6. **Access:** "*Do you think that all women and girls in this site feel able to use the spaces with activities for women and girls?"*
7. **Access:** *"Have you heard of the IRC spaces with activities for children and adolescents in this site and have your children used them?"*
    a. *Why have your children not used them?*
8. **Effectiveness:** *"Do you think that the IRC spaces with activities for children and adolescents improve the emotion wellbeing and / or skills of the children and adolescents who attend?"*
9. **Access:** *"Do you think that all children and adolescents in this site feel able to use the spaces with activities for children and adolescents?"*
10. **Respect:** *"Do NGO staff in this camp treat people with respect and dignity?"*
11. **Voice:** *"Do you feel comfortable approaching IRC staff regarding the services provided in this site?"*
12. **Open Question:** *Is there anything else you would like to tell us about IRC services in this camp?*

Questions 7 – 9 were not asked in Diavata, as IRC was not running safe spaces for children there.

Between round 1 and 2:

- We dropped question 3, as the team were not able to make any course corrections between rounds given procurement and activities already underway to construct the facilities.
- We included the following: Access: "*Do you feel comfortable with your female family members*

using these spaces?" (asked only to men)

- We changed question 9 to: "*Do you think that parents feel comfortable with their children using the spaces with activities for children and adolescents?*"
    - *"Why are some parents not comfortable?"*

Between round 2 and 3:

- We included the following: **Service Quality** "*What hygiene items that are currently not available at this camp do people need?"*

Part 4: Implementing the Feedback Mechanism: What We Did, Survey Responses and Lessons Learned

Implementing the Feedback Mechanism—What We Did:

Survey Administration: They survey was administered by an independent Greek research organisation – Hellenic Research House – who were managed by GT, with IRC's M&E team leading the logistics. The survey was administered roughly every two months in all four camps in round 1, and then following the closure of Gianitsa between round 1 and 2, just in the remaining three sites.

Preparation of the Report: The data from the survey were passed from Hellenic Research House onto Ground Truth, who prepared the Feedback Reports for the Pilots after each survey round (see Annex 4). The Feedback Reports ranged from 14-15 pages, providing breakdown of question responses by sex where relevant, and including some narrative interpretation of the data to prompt the Greece team in their review of the report. The feedback reports can be access here.

Internal Dialogue: The Greece M&E team first facilitated a discussion of the results and potential course correction within the programme teams, and then prepared and initiated a Skype call with programme teams, CVC and GT to discuss the feedback report; what issues the programme teams would like to explore further in the external dialogue; and how to adjust the survey for the next round, where applicable. A semi-structured set of questions were used to facilitate the discussions.

External Dialogue: The Greece M&E team arranged dialogue sessions with community members in the camps where access was permitted, relaying the feedback that they had heard from the surveys to the clients and seeking their insights into reasons for certain pieces of feedback, and prompting discussion about possible options for course correction. The M&E team prepared a brief report on the Focus Group Discussions, which offered the programme teams with more nuanced information on client perspectives and that were taken into account during the action planning meetings.

Course Correction: In a subsequent action planning meeting, the programme teams identified what course correction they could take straight away, as well as those areas that they could not respond to immediately, and could not respond to at all.

Adaptation of the Feedback Mechanism: After each round of feedback, CVC and GT agreed with the M&E and programme teams how the survey questions might need to be changed, added or removed; these changed were reflected in the subsequent round.

Implementing the Feedback Mechanism—What We Learned:

Recognise the importance of internal communication channels: Front line staff receive client feedback on a daily basis, but without strong – and sometimes formalised - communication channels in place the feedback that they hear is not reaching programme decision makers or considered authoritative data. We recommend programme teams look at ways to strengthen the communication exchange between front line staff and decision makers, such that feedback which front line staff hear can be given due weight and consideration in decision making processes. Some front line staff in the Greece programme reported being quite involved in decision making by their superiors, and thus more willing to pass on feedback when they thought it would have an impact. Managers may consider how to foster a team culture in which staff feel empowered to communicate feedback, without fear of it reflecting poorly upon their own performance. One idea is to share feedback reports more widely within the IRC including frontline staff and soliciting their views on the results, whether it resonates with their experiences and how best to move forward. This also allows frontline staff to dialogue the data with communities on an on-going basis rather than just in the occasional focus group. Another idea is to run a short staff survey every 5 weeks (with purely quantitative data) to keep a check on whether staff feel that clients' and their own feedback is being appropriately considered by decision makers.

Formalised feedback increases validity and use: Programme teams participating in the pilot found a lot of value in having the feedback documented in a report, which they then felt obliged to review and identify action points upon through a fixed meeting point. Front line staff also reported that by presenting the feedback in a report it gave further validity to the feedback that they were already hearing on an ad hoc basis.

Recognise the capacity of the client group and empower them to participate: The client group participating in the pilot were keen to provide feedback and to engage in decisions over project design and delivery. Where clients are interested and capable and teams have access, programme teams should consider ways that they can engage clients in participating in decision making beyond consulting them for their feedback. This can empower clients and also communicates our respect for their own abilities to meet their needs.

Close the loop: The team struggled with closing the loop and explaining to clients that although they had heard their feedback they were not able to address it. There were a range of reasons why they were not able to respond: in some cases the team would have been able to address the feedback, but they had made a decision – guided by other considerations – which didn't align with *all* clients' preferences. In other cases the programme teams could not course correct a service given that investments had already been made in infrastructure designed to meet the needs of an earlier context. In yet other cases, the programme teams were limited by external political factors in their ability to respond. Some front line staff became reluctant to collect further feedback from clients when they were not able to inform clients about what had been done in response to feedback that the IRC had previously received. The team would have also benefitted from stronger information sharing across the country programme on the reasons for certain decisions and non-action, so that all staff would be empowered to provide clients with as much information as possible as to what the programme team heard from them and how we have decided or have been able to respond.

M&E teams and programme teams need to work closely but have distinct roles: In this pilot, the Greece M&E team took clear leadership over the process of collecting client feedback, and working with CVC and GT in compiling the feedback in a clear, informative and accurate presentation to inform programme level decision making. The M&E team also facilitated discussion of the data in the internal dialogue meetings and held responsibility for documenting the responses taken. Moving forward, our recommendation is that the M&E team should continue to be responsible for supporting programme teams to collect and use client feedback to inform their decision making, bringing their technical skills to bear on data collection, analysis and presentation. However, programme teams should take on responsibility for ensuring that they take decisions on the basis of client feedback during their regular grant review meetings and in cross-programme level team meetings, and to close the loop with clients to explain and discuss the action taken and its implications.

Leadership and programme management sets the tone: Senior management were initially very invested in and supportive of the piloting process. Senior management buy-in and leadership are extremely important for a country programme to be responsive to client feedback: they can create a culture of responsiveness by requesting and responding to feedback from the staff, and can create incentives for programme teams to be client responsive by periodically asking them to demonstrate how their programmes have been informed by client feedback.

Summary of Client Feedback over Three Rounds:

- The surveys used a Likert scale where 1 on the scale represented “Not at all”; 2 representing “Somewhat” and 3 representing “Completely”.
- Overall, the level of client awareness and satisfaction in IRC services was good.
- Responses to those questions where the team made changes to the programming – including those that were already planned to take place as well as those changes informed specifically by client feedback – showed improvements in levels of satisfaction. For example, the round 1 survey showed a low level of men’s awareness of the women’s safe spaces. Following further outreach and awareness raising between rounds one and two combined with the spaces having been open longer, the score for this question went from 1.8 / 3 to 2.2 / 3, and climbed further to 2.6 / 3 by round three. This provides a tangible reflection for the team of the impact of those outreach activities.
- In other areas where the teams did not make any course corrections – either because they weren’t considered necessary, or because the team were not able to immediately course correct – the scores showed little change. This validates the value in repeating questions to show how action (or lack of action) affects how people experience services.
- Two positive sets of scores are those for the last two questions, which asked whether the clients felt like they were treated with respect by the IRC staff and could approach the IRC with feedback. The responses to the questions were consistently positive. This is important for programme teams and particularly managers to take note of: even if the context and other factors prevents us from being able to deliver *what* clients want, we can still have control over *how* we provide our services and interact with clients. Routine interaction between staff and clients in the camps has clearly had an impact upon this.

Detailed feedback and summaries of changes in responses over the three rounds can be read in the Feedback Reports in Annex 4.

Part 5: Next Steps and Recommendations

Review Learnings Highlighted in this Case Study: Many of the lessons learned through this pilot have been documented in the relevant learning sections earlier in this case study. We would encourage the programme teams to consider whether they resonate with them, and what action they might put in place to respond to some of the opportunities presented by this learning.

M&E and Programme Teams to Work Together in Finding an Appropriate Way Forward: More broadly, we recommend that programme teams and M&E teams work together to ensure that client feedback on a broad range of issues is captured as part of their data collections. Typically, many country programmes collect data which is directly related to the logframe(s) – on the quality and scope of their activities, and that are used to verify the indicators of progress towards the outcomes that the country programme have defined. Engaging in a more open, unstructured listening exercise with clients can be an important way to ensure that teams are capturing the perspectives of clients on a range of topics which inform programming and operational decisions. We also encourage the country programme to consider how it can achieve the standards for gathering and using client feedback \and how they can optimise their operating conditions for responsiveness (see *Constraints and Inhibitors of the Operating Context*), detailed in the soon to be released IRC Client Responsive Programming Framework.

Strengthen Internal Communication Systems: We would also recommend that programme and senior management team in Greece look into ways to improve communication up and down the hierarchy and across teams: the findings from this pilot indicate that front line staff are lacking information about what they can tell clients about what we can and cannot do, and that some feel that the feedback that they are hearing from clients is not being adequately considered. Internal feedback channels can help address this. By modelling responsiveness within the country programme, we also create the incentive for programme staff to take the perspectives of their clients into account in decision making.

This product has been funded by the UK Department for International Development.

The IRC would like to thank the UK Government for their generous support to the IRC/DFID Strategic Grant, *Making the Case, Making the Difference: Strengthening Innovation and Effectiveness in Humanitarian Assistance*.

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