16 Key Lessons on Collecting and Using Client Feedback:
Highlights from the IRC Client Voice and Choice / Ground Truth Solutions Pilots

Chloë Whitley, Senior Coordinator – Client Responsiveness
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A. Lessons about Feedback Collection

1. Country programmes benefit from the combination of both quantitative and qualitative feedback data

The findings from surveys and other quantitative data collection methodologies provided country programme management with an accessible snapshot of client feedback, allowing them to track trends in client feedback over time. Such quantitative data also served programme teams as a useful prompt for digging deeper into certain themes through focus group discussions. The focus group discussions provided the teams with the type of qualitative information that they felt they needed in order to make decisions about how to design or course correct a programme.

- *Kenya management indicated a desire for a "data dashboard" to be able to review aggregated data from across programmes, to track levels of client satisfaction*
- *The South Sudan Health team reported that they found the survey results a helpful starting point for focus group discussions. Their previous focus group discussions hadn't enabled them to dig so deep into key issues.*

2. Internally administered and externally administered feedback collection each have specific advantages and disadvantages, and may work best in combination

In one pilot, when the feedback channel was administered externally, clients were more critical when giving feedback on the way staff interacted with them (a topic of sensitivity), but there were no significant differences in their responses to questions on other, less sensitive, areas. In another pilot, which purposefully compared internally collected vs. externally collected data over the life time of the project, there were no discernible differences in clients' responses to questions when the feedback channel was administered internally compared to when it was administered externally.

In addition to one pilot in which client feedback was more negative on sensitive issues when the feedback channel was administered externally, evidence from other contexts also suggests that externally administered feedback channels can be helpful in soliciting more open and honest feedback on certain issues, and can also play an important role in triangulating internally administered feedback channels. Further, one of our pilots also showed that having a third party administer the feedback channel can incentivise the team to be accountable for the actions that they have taken in response to the feedback.

However, the experience from the pilots showed us that not only are externally administered feedback channels prohibitive to some country team's budgets, some teams also felt that they were more onerous to manage, and in one case the team had less trust in the externally collected data than in the data they had collected themselves.

Our recommendation is thus that teams primarily use internally administered feedback channels, but employ externally administered feedback channels on a periodic basis to consult on more sensitive issues and triangulate internally collected data.

- *South Sudan Health team placed greater value on internally administered channels, where the teams were in a better place to interpret the data and thus considered it to be more valuable to them in aiding programme decision making.*
- *The Kenya Health team received very high satisfaction responses from clients when administering the feedback channel internally. When the survey was repeated by a third party, the responses to questions on more sensitive issues of fairness and cultural sensitivity revealed somewhat less positive responses.*
- *South Sudan Protection team had a greater incentive to acknowledge and respond to the negative feedback they received when the feedback channel was administered by a third party who actively asked them how they would be responding to the feedback.*

3. Teams may require capacity building in order to administer feedback channels

Related to the point above, if the recommendation is for teams to primarily use internally administered feedback channels, then it will be important for them to have the capacity – both in terms of staff time as well as competencies – to be able to administer the channels effectively. Programme teams and organisational leadership should consider how they can invest in developing this capacity.

- *In Syria, the team needed some time to train the staff to be able to administer the surveys and focus group discussions before they could start with implementing the feedback mechanism.*

4. The frequency of proactive feedback collection should be tailored to the context

The frequency of proactive feedback collection (such as surveys and focus group discussions) should be determined based on the particular operating context. A number of factors influence that decision:

a) The fluidity of the context: in protracted crisis situations, the priority needs and preferences of the IRC's clients aren't likely to change as often as they would in more dynamic, emergency contexts. Thus, client perspectives and the client group who we are consulting are also less likely to change frequently. The less often clients' perspectives are likely to change, the less often teams need to consult them for their views. However, programme leadership and country programme management should be careful that this does not serve as an excuse for not consulting clients for their feedback on a regular basis.

b) The frequency of changes to IRC programming or operations: in some contexts the IRC has been implementing a very similar programme over a long period of time; in other contexts our programming is new and continually changing under new grants and with new staff (who may interact differently with clients). In cases of more stable programming, clients' perspectives are less likely to change as frequently as with more changing programming and operations. As above, the less often clients' perspectives are likely to change, the less often we need to consult them. See above also for the word of caution!

c) The closeness of the relationship between the IRC team and clients: much feedback is obtained through routine interactions between staff and clients in the course of delivering services. If the team have developed a close and open relationship with clients through such activities, it may be that a formalised proactive feedback collection is not needed as often as in cases where the team has a more distant or less close relationship with clients. However, teams should still consult clients periodically even if they consider the relationship to be good, as it may be that precisely because of this closeness that clients would feel less inclined to give open and honest feedback directly to those staff members.

d) The team's capacity to act upon feedback received: this factor came up often in our pilots. Various factors constrained the team's ability to act upon the feedback received, including the external context, having less control over their budget being a sub to another organisation acting as prime on a grant, implementing infrastructure which cannot be changed frequently and quickly.

Teams should seek to understand these different factors, and decide a frequency for data collection which is most appropriate to them. At its most frequent, staff in the pilots we implemented felt that every 3 months would be appropriate. By asking for feedback more frequently that teams weren't able to respond to, teams risk clients becoming frustrated and them becoming less willing to engage in the future. By not consulting clients frequently enough, we risk losing a full understanding of client priority needs and preferences at any given time.

- *In Greece, the teams were not able to act upon client feedback due to government restrictions, and continuing to ask them for their feedback – even on other issues – led to clients being frustrated that the team had not acted upon previous feedback they had given.*
- *In South Sudan's Health programme, the team had been implementing a largely similar programme over a number of years amongst the same community; through this the staff had also developed a close relationship with their clients. For them, it wasn't so necessary to burden clients with responding to a frequent survey. Yet having a structured dialogue with them gave the team important insights that they would otherwise not have been able to get through routine programme delivery.*

5. **Surveys should be adjusted to respond to the information needs of teams as the context changes, but yet still able to provide teams and management with trend data**

The benefit of standardised surveys is that they can provide teams and management with trend data over time and across programmes. Thus, a certain number of questions (or comparable questions, where the wording is simply readjusted for clarity or relevance to the programme) should be kept constant over time and across programmes. However, teams wanted the flexibility to be able to swap out certain questions which were no longer relevant given changes in the context or client group; to ask some questions less frequently (where responses were not changing much from one round of the survey to the next); and to introduce new questions where the team had an information need.

- *In South Sudan's Health programme, the team didn't feel it was relevant to ask clients a question about safe access to the programme, as they thought that this was not an issue. However, when prompted to retain a question on this topic, it revealed important information which the team had previously not been aware of.*
- *In the Greece programme, the context and the client group were changing so frequently that the team wanted to change some of the questions asked in the survey to ensure relevance to clients and the team. The questions which had originally been proposed for the survey had also been identified by a different management team than the one overseeing the programme by rounds 2 and 3 of the survey: the new management thus wanted to adjust the questions according to what they felt to be most relevant.*

6. **Feedback collection requires language capacity**

This seems like an obvious lesson learned, but in our pilots we saw that in translating from English into the clients' language took quite a bit of time for the translating team to agree the exact meaning had been conveyed in the translation. In some of the contexts where we piloted, multiple languages were spoken by the client group: in order for the feedback collection to be accessible for everyone, this not only requires translation into multiple languages, but capacity to administer the feedback channel (either within the team or with the external actor administering the data collection). In a number of cases, it was difficult to find this capacity, particularly internally when staff that spoke a certain language were much sought after for various programme activities.

- *In Greece, the majority of the population in the camps spoke Arabic as their mother tongue. A significant additional number spoke Kurdish as their mother tongue, but some of those could also understand Arabic. A further percentage spoke other languages. Given capacity of the team and of the external data collection firm, a decision was taken to administer the survey and focus group discussions in just Arabic and Kurdish. However, this meant that a small proportion of the population were not able to participate. Given that this was a pilot, this was considered regrettable but acceptable. However, in routine feedback collection teams would need to find a way for all clients to be able to provide their feedback.*
- *In Kenya, 11 different languages were spoken in the camp. As the survey was conducted by community "incentive workers", capacity could be found for all languages. However, there is a risk that clients will not share open and honest feedback with people from their own community given unknown social dynamics, and further, there is a risk that those individuals are not incentivised to pass on exactly the feedback that they heard from clients, given how it may reflect upon their own performance, job prospects or upon their community. This is particularly an issue when there are few staff speaking a certain language, as the feedback is passing through just one or two individuals, and cannot easily be verified.*

7. **In designing the feedback collection methodologies, teams need careful explanation of the differences between collecting the perspectives of clients or collecting information from clients (which the teams then make a judgement upon)**

Many of the teams with which we were designing the pilots found it difficult to differentiate between the questions that they might ask clients in order to obtain their feedback (with a view to being more "responsive and accountable") and those questions that they might ask in order to obtain factual information from clients (in order to verify their logframe indicators or to identify what the team thinks are the clients' priority needs). There is a clear difference between the intent of asking for these different kinds of information, and it is thus important that these differences are explained carefully to the team and understood in the process of developing survey and focus group discussion questions.

- *In the South Sudan Health programme, the team had a comprehensive monitoring system in place, through which they were capturing mainly factual information from clients (for example, used to determine whether and when they had received a visit from a community health worker) but they were also asking clients for their perspectives on the quality of services.*

B. Lessons about Acting upon Feedback

8. Feedback presented in a simple, easy-to-read report aids discussion and decision making

Many of the teams with which we piloted reported that they found the simple reports which shows the client feedback in charts alongside some limited interpretation of the data to be useful to them in aiding their review, analysis and decision making about how to respond to the client feedback.

- *In Greece, the protection team had previously been aware of some of the issues that were identified through the surveys and focus group discussions, but felt in a better position to be able to advocate to their management and colleagues for changes to the programme in response to that feedback when it was presented in a report: the report somehow "validated" the feedback for the team, and the report format allowed that feedback to be shared with a wider group of decision makers.*

9. Feedback data is rarely considered in isolation of other data, and team responses to feedback should be contextualised

It is important for us to acknowledge in our design of feedback mechanisms and when we are explaining to clients how our decision making processes work, that in most cases a decision about how to act upon client feedback is taken based not only on that client feedback, but also on other sources of information. Programme teams should have a way to be able to record the various pieces of information that they took into consideration when making a decision, as well as the decision itself, so as to be able to communicate this to their colleagues, managers and of course, to their clients.

Client feedback should also be contextualised, if it is to be reviewed by more senior management without the full understanding of the other information that the programme teams may be considering when making their decision about how to respond. No two programmes are alike, and thus even with the team's best intentions client satisfaction may be much lower or higher in one programme compared to another due to reasons which are outside of the control of the team. Reasons for differences in levels of client satisfaction may also include the nature of the programming itself: evidence from other contexts shows that clients may be typically more positive about very tangible services like basic healthcare, compared to less tangible but still valuable services like protection activities providing information about services.

- *In Greece, programme teams were sometimes unable to act upon client feedback given government restrictions. In other cases, they decided not to act upon client feedback because the programme was already meeting industry SPHERE standards, and the team had limited capacity to go beyond these standards to meet clients' expectations. In such cases, it is important for the team to be able to clearly communicate to their various stakeholders why a decision was taken, and why client levels of satisfaction have or have not changed in response to the decision and subsequent action taken.*

10. Consider how to facilitate participation by clients in decision making, where clients are interested and able to do so

In at least one of the contexts where we piloted, clients were keen to participate more fully in decision making about how to respond to the feedback, and wanted to participate in addressing the feedback provided by their community.

- *In Greece, some focus group discussion respondents reported that they wanted to address some of the feedback provided by the community themselves, but they lacked the tools to be able to do so and so asked the IRC to provide them with the tools.*

C. Lessons about Closing the Loop

11. Identify how to support teams to communicate to clients what they decided about how to respond to client feedback

In at least one context, closing the loop was challenging for the team: the clients had communicated a number of issues that the team were unable to respond to given the operating context. The team felt quite uncomfortable to communicate their decisions and non-action in such cases. In this case, the team may have benefitted from support from their senior management about how to communicate their decisions and actions, whilst not jeopardising their relationship with other stakeholders or the clients themselves.

- *In Greece, the team were often unable to act upon the client feedback they were receiving due to restrictions enforced by the government or other actors. However, the team did not want to foster resentment or frustration amongst the clients about other actors with whom the team needed to maintain a good working relationship in order to be able to deliver the programme.*

D. Lessons about Management of the Feedback Mechanism

12. Teams should build client feedback mechanisms into their project designs

A number of teams found it challenging to give the feedback mechanism due time and attention during the piloting process, as their time and effort was already allocated to delivering project activities. If the feedback mechanism had been built into the design of the project, including the workplan, staffing plan and budget, then the teams would have been in a better position to implement it as planned.

- *In Syria, the team were operating in an extremely challenging context, and introducing the activities associated with implementing a feedback mechanism on top of their planned activities stretched the team's resources. Had the mechanism been built into their project designs, then they would have been better able to plan for its implementation.*

13. Programme staff and M&E staff should work hand-in hand, but responsiveness should be the responsibility of the programme lead

In a number of cases, we saw M&E staff playing a very proactive role in the implementation of the feedback mechanism. While their technical skills and stewardship over the data is valuable, on occasion this reduced the ownership over the data and sense of responsibility of the programme teams to respond to it. Programme leads should take responsibility for identifying who their clients are, what they want to consult their clients about, and how to respond to the client feedback. M&E teams should advise and support programme leads on quality and appropriate data collection, management and presentation of the data to aid decision making.

- *In Kenya's Health programme it was the "Safe Programming Team" rather than the M&E team which had been managing the feedback mechanism up until the point of the pilot. Even throughout the pilot, it was this team that took the most ownership and directed discussions over the design and implementation of the mechanism and about how to respond to the data, rather than the Health team.*
- *In Greece, the M&E team took clear ownership over the process of piloting the feedback mechanism: while they played a valuable role in overseeing this process and ensuring that it its implementation was of quality, the added fact of their being at least two programme teams implicated in the feedback findings reduced the overall sense of ownership by the programme teams over the feedback mechanism.*

E. Lessons about Organisation Management

14. Foster staff responsiveness in order to promote client responsiveness

In a number of contexts in which we piloted, both senior management in the country programme, programme leads and front line staff members shared a need for better communication between staff members up and down the hierarchy: both in terms of more senior members encouraging and seeking out the feedback and ideas of more junior staff members, and also in terms of senior staff members passing down information to programme teams so that they're better able to respond to questions and feedback from clients.

- *In Kenya, both senior and more junior staff members reported that they wanted to encourage greater internal responsiveness, that is, open communication and feedback from more junior staff members to more senior members, which more senior staff members respond to. They felt that this would have an instrumental value to client responsiveness, that is, if staff members feel that their own feedback is being listened to and responded to, then they will be more likely to seek out and pass on to their more senior colleagues the feedback from clients. They also felt that this would have value in of itself, in strengthening relationships across the country programme, surfacing the ideas of staff about how the programme or operations could be better, and in empowering more junior staff members to participate in decision making.*
- *In Greece, more junior staff members would like to have the opportunity to share their feedback with their management on a more regular basis, and to have that feedback fully acknowledged and responded to.*

15. Organisational management should convey responsiveness as a priority (alongside programme delivery and fundraising)

In at least one of the contexts in which we piloted, programme teams wanted to prioritise programme delivery over the processes of collecting and responding to client feedback. While addressing humanitarian needs is always the imperative for teams, organisational management can play an important role in requiring teams to collect and respond to client feedback given the role that doing so can play in strengthening programme effectiveness and efficiency, as well as the team's relationship with their clients and even the empowerment of the clients themselves.

- *In the South Sudan protection programme, the team leader expressed their primary objective to be fundraising for the project. Whilst undoubtedly important, this meant that the objective expressed to the rest of the team of collecting client feedback was to obtain data which could be used to support a funding application, rather than the primary objective of doing so being communicated as being programme responsiveness and accountability.*

16. Organisational leadership should foster a culture where we embrace failure

In a number of contexts, we saw some reticence amongst programme teams to fully acknowledge negative feedback which they received from clients. Oftentimes, a certain sense of fear could be sensed when the teams were talking to others about the feedback that they had received: some were quite quick to dismiss certain pieces of feedback and in other cases negative feedback was brushed aside as not possible to address.

It's important for organisational leadership to note that team members may be most motivated to receive positive feedback from their clients and colleagues, to have security in their positions and perhaps the opportunity for professional development, and to be able to secure continued funding for their activities and for their own salary. These, and numerous other incentives often make it difficult for individuals and teams to fully embrace negative feedback, and to see it as an opportunity to learn and improve.

Organisational management should thus look into ways that they can encourage teams to share negative feedback in a non-threatening environment, and clearly demonstrate that it shouldn't have to have negative consequences for them as an individual (providing that individual was not actually at fault!).