IRC CLIENT-RESPONSIVENESS

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We know that listening to and taking client perspectives into account is critical to strengthening the quality, relevance and appropriateness of the aid and services we provide to people affected by crisis.

We value our clients' feedback throughout the project cycle from the design, planning, implementation and close-out phases and are committed to responding and acting upon it to improve our programming and our accountability to affected populations.

What is Client-Responsive Programming?

Programming is client-responsive when we design and implement in a way that takes into account the views of our intended and direct clients.

This requires that we systematically, deliberately and regularly listen to and collect the diverse perspectives of our clients and analyse and use their feedback to make decisions and to plan for, or course correct an action. It also entails us communicating and explaining to our clients how their feedback has (or has not) informed our programmatic decisions and actions.

Why is Client-Responsive Programming important for the IRC?

There is growing evidence* that placing people affected by crisis at the centre of our decisions about what aid to deliver, to whom, where, when, how and why will **make our assistance more**:

Effective — Successful for achieving the results and change clients want to see;

Relevant — Suitable in meeting clients' priority needs and expectations;

Appropriate — Right for clients in the context and situation they are living in;

Accountable — Responsible to our clients, affected communities and other key stakeholders for the decisions and actions we take.

Client-Responsive Programming will also contribute to:

Building trust with the people we serve

If people feel that their perspectives are being valued and acted upon, they are more likely to share information with us and have confidence in using our services;

Ensuring their protection

If people trust the IRC and its staff, they are more likely to tell us when they feel threatened or are being harassed;

Helping us manage risks

Client feedback can also help us to identify and deter risks of fraud, corruption and any other illegal or inappropriate behaviours from our own staff or partners, and to effectively mitigate and manage those risks.

How does the IRC deliver Client-Responsive Programming?

The Eight Actions

These are guidance and standards for implementing the Eight Client-Responsive Actions at each phase of the project life cycle (project design, planning, implementation and close-out).

This includes:

1 **Assessing and preparing the design of feedback channels appropriate to the context and clients,** and putting in place the operational requirements;

2 **Informing clients about the purpose of feedback collection** and how we will respond to it, as well as the process of collecting their feedback;

3 **Compiling and presenting the feedback data** which has been collected;

4 **Interpreting the data**;

5 **Deciding and planning what actions and decisions to take** in response to the feedback;

6 **Explaining and discussing those decisions with our clients**;

7 **Acting upon those decisions**; and,

8 **Reviewing and monitoring progress and impact of the action upon clients**.

Good and great practices standards have been developed to measure and support the implementation of each action.

The Eight Enablers

These provide guidance for IRC country programmes on assessing their internal and external environment in terms of how it enables or hinders Client-Responsive Programming, together with practical guidance on implementing effective strategies to create a more conducive operating context for Client-Responsive Programming.

The guidance includes:

A **Defining roles and responsibilities**;

B **Data management**;

C **Defining internal and external systems and pathways**;

D **Leadership**;

E **Resourcing Client-Responsive Programming**;

F **Managing risks**;

G **Internal and partner organisations' development and capacity building**; and,

H **Coordination and collective actions**.

What support is the Client-Responsiveness Team providing?

Resource kit

We have developed and we are sharing tools, guidance, presentation and training materials to strengthen our teams' understanding and capacity to be client-responsive.

Technical assistance

We are providing technical support, remote and on site facilitation and trainings to support teams to design and implement Client-Responsive Programming and we are facilitating peer exchange and learning among different country teams.

Working on enabling conditions

We are providing guidance and advice for teams to strengthen their programmatic and operational processes to improve their ability to be client-responsive.

Generating learning

We are conducting research, consultations and developing new resources and approaches to enhance our understanding about how to improve Client-Responsive Programming.

Influence and collaboration

We are sharing our experience, learning, ideas and impact and we are collaborating with other stakeholders to influence policy and practice across the humanitarian sector in support of Client-Responsive Programming.

? Frequently Asked Questions

We use the term "client", because it signals our belief that the people we serve have a right and the power to decide to what kind of aid and services they need and want.

For us, "beneficiary" has a more passive connotation: it implies that people are recipients of aid and services (without necessary having the choice or power to influence it). We also don't want to make the assumption that everyone necessarily benefits: we want to hear clients' opinion about whether they think they have benefitted, or not.

The IRC defines a "client" as a person or institution for whom it provides, or intends to provide assistance or services. We make a distinction between intended clients, direct clients, and indirect clients.

Intended clients

People and other stakeholders who might benefit from aid and services provided by the IRC. Examples include:

> *people who are living in the catchment area of IRC programmes* and meet the eligibility criteria to receive aid or use IRC services;

> *staff of government and non-government organisations who are working in a specific sector* and in the catchment area of IRC's intended programmes and who we are considering training, supporting or equipping.

Direct clients

People and other stakeholders (e.g. partner organisations, government institutions) who are directly targeted by the aid and/or are using services provided by the IRC. Examples include:

> *patients in IRC clinics;*

> *staff of government and non-government organisations who the IRC is training, supporting or equipping;*

> *people receiving cash assistance from the IRC* or from one of our partner organisations.

Indirect clients

People and other institutions who are not directly receiving assistance from the IRC, but who are connected to people or institutions which are, and therefore might potentially also benefit in some way from IRC's provision of assistance to those people/institutions. Examples include:

> *families and dependants of IRC's direct clients* e.g. husbands or children of a woman participating in a livelihoods skill-development programme, who may also benefit from the additional income that the woman is able to earn as a result of participating in the training programme;

> *a partner organisation of, or another department within an institution which is directly targeted by the aid and services provided by the IRC,* who may also benefit in some extent from the organisational capacity development support services provided by the IRC.

Accountability refers to the duty we have, as a humanitarian organisation, to create the conditions in which people can hold us responsible for the decisions and actions we take. Given that we do not have control over whether the people we serve, our clients, decide to hold us to account, we have therefore decided as an agency to place our focus on:

Our own process and behaviour

We are placing our focus on the IRC's capacity to be responsive to its clients – the people and institutions we serve or intend to serve - as something we can control, as opposed to what we can't control – whether or not our clients actually hold us to account. We have taken on the responsibility to ensure that we are doing everything we can to live up to our ambitions as regards Accountability to Affected Populations;

All stages of the programme cycle

We are also committed to collecting and using our clients' feedback to inform our decisions at all key programming stages (design, planning, implementation and close-out) as opposed to collecting it just during the implementation phase – the phase which most organisations tend to focus on when collecting client feedback.

The internal and external enabling factors

We intend to better understand, and to strengthen the internal and external enablers which will make responsive programming more likely, by addressing the barriers and necessary conditions for Client-Responsive Programming. These include such factors as: appropriate allocation of roles and responsibilities; defining internal and external information pathways; managing data; resourcing Client-Responsiveness; fostering leadership; managing risks; developing our internal and partners' capacity; and, facilitating improved coordination and collective actions.

Focusing on consultation with clients as the most viable current approach, but aiming towards greater participation

Our ultimate aim is for clients to be active participants in deciding how aid is delivered. However, our approach also reflects the fact that for most humanitarian responses the goal of full participation is a step too far. At the IRC, we have thus made the tactical decision to focus our current efforts on the more modest and achievable goal of systematic and deliberate consultation with clients. However, we will continually review progress, and will adjust our ambitions in line with changes in practice.

No, client perspectives are considered by IRC staff alongside the IRC's values, mandate and programme context (such as funding, legal and operational priorities and constraints) as well as other data (such as technical, social, economic data) when making programmatic decisions.

However, even if the IRC can't meet all of our clients' expectations and demands, it is a fundamental aspect of our approach that we communicate a response to our clients' feedback (even if that response is negative) and, as far as possible, we refer our clients' unmet requests to other stakeholders who might be able to address them.

Client-Responsiveness requires that staff members solicit and listen to feedback and other's perspectives.

This requires:

listening and facilitation skills;

cultural sensitivity;

curiosity and inclusiveness.

It entails that staff respond to feedback with maturity and sensitivity and require empathy, optimism and humility. It demands staff take appropriate decisions and make changes to their behaviour or actions in response to feedback; and it requires accountability, learning and adaptation.

All of us have a responsibility for making IRC more client-responsive. Each of us can do so in different ways, depending on specific roles. The list below provides a suggested framework, for individual regions and country programmes to adapt to their unique staffing structure and context.

> **Regional and Country Directors**
> Responsible for providing leadership on the IRC commitment to Client-Responsive Programming;

> **Programme/Technical Coordinators and those in similar positions of responsibility**
> Responsible for the operationalisation and oversight of Client-Responsive Programming;

> **Monitoring and Evaluation teams**
> Play a critical role in helping programme teams to set up mechanisms to collect, compile and interpret client perspectives;

> **Grants and Compliance teams**
> Help to ensure that proposal budgets include adequate resources to allow the collection and analysis of client feedback and to ensure compliance with donor requirements for Accountability to Affected Populations/Client-Responsiveness;

> **Human Resources**
> Support programme teams to identify and recruit staff who have the qualities needed to be client-responsive;

> **Other support units (logistics, security)**
> Take client feedback into account when making decisions and in strengthen their understanding of the context and operating environment;

> **Programme and field teams**
> In coordination with the teams mentioned above, these teams have the responsibility implement Client-Responsive Programming;

> **All programme and support staff**
> Responsible for supporting and facilitating Client- Responsiveness.

Client-Responsive Programming is not necessarily costly: it simply requires proper planning of the necessary resources during programme design and the corresponding budget development. Teams have different options depending on the amount of resources at their disposal and the context in which they operate. Spending more will not necessarily yield better results.

Here are some of the resources teams would need to take into account:

Human resources: IRC staff and potentially consultants and short-term contracted staff such as enumerators, data entry clerks;

Transportation and travel to engage with clients; and

Equipment: to collect, compile and analyse clients-feedback.

Cost also varies depending on the type of feedback channels that are being used, who is administering them, the frequency of collecting feedback or the context and ease or level of access to clients.

The Client-Responsiveness Team, which is part of the Governance Unit at IRC Headquarters has been set up to provide support to country and project teams across international programmes to be more responsive to their clients. The team develops tools and guidance notes and provides technical advice and capacity strengthening for IRC staff based in country programmes and to those working with and supporting them, such as other technical units.

The team works in close coordination with the IRC's Regional Measurement Action Coordinators and sector-specific Technical Advisors in designing and implementing feedback cycles appropriate to the context and programme. The Client Responsiveness Team works alongside other strategic initiatives, the Strategy Unit and participating countries and regions in aligning and harmonising the IRC's approach to the delivery of its 2020 Strategy.

Objectives

Programming is client-responsive when we design and implement in a way that takes into account the views of our clients. In so doing, the IRC seeks to ensure that its programming is more relevant to its intended and direct clients, and better at achieving its aims. Programming has mainstreamed protection principles when we design and implement in a way that considers client safety and dignity, meaningful access, empowerment and participation and accountability. In so doing, IRC seeks to ensure that its programming protects those it serves. Both initiatives are applicable programming in all contexts, outcome areas and programming phases. Both seek to improve the quality of the IRC's programming for the benefit of our clients.

Approach

Both initiatives place the IRC clients at the centre of aid. Both seek to bring the perspectives, preferences, aspirations and expectations of the IRC's clients into its decision making. Whilst this act of collecting and using client perspectives to inform decision making is the raison d'etre of Client-Responsive Programming, such communication is one of a range of techniques used in Protection Mainstreaming to ensure that the protection principles are achieved. Client-Responsive Programming contributes to Protection Mainstreaming by improving the communication and relationships with IRC staff, making them more likely to report allegations of abuse and to advise staff how their programming may be doing harm. The processes used by Protection Mainstreaming may also help IRC staff and partners to identify areas in which they can strengthen communication with clients and the responsiveness of their programmes.

Tools and Guidance

The IRC's tools and guidance for Client-Responsive Programming and Protection Mainstreaming have been designed to be complementary to each other, and to align in terms of terminology and techniques. It should be noted that this framing may be adjusted when communicating with outside audiences where we seek to explain how the IRC's work contributes towards sector-wide priorities. The key difference is that Accountability to Affected Populations is one of four principles of Protection Mainstreaming, which are promoted to improve the quality of our programming. As such, the Protection Mainstreaming approach identifies the overall importance of ensuring accountability to our clients. Whereas Client Responsiveness aims much more specifically to promote participation and accountability, and thus provides much more detailed guidance and sets standards for the IRC in these specific areas.

Responsible Staff

Fundamentally, the responsibility for both Client-Responsive Programming and Protection Mainstreaming sits with programme leads and programme staff. Respectively, they may be supported by their country colleagues working on M&E and Protection/Safe Programming. At HQ, the approach, guidance for and technical advice on Client-Responsive Programming is provided by the Client Responsiveness Team in the Governance Technical Unit, whilst Protection Mainstreaming technical advice is provided by the Strategic Initiatives Team in the Violence Prevention and Response Unit. These two teams work closely share experiences, to harmonise IRC's approaches and provide appropriate and complementary support.

Look on our RescueNet page where you can find all our guidance, tools, learning papers and other resources, and/or contact the Client-Responsiveness Team.

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The International Rescue Committee (IRC) responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises and helps people to survive and rebuild their lives. Founded in 1933 at the request of Albert Einstein, the IRC offers life-saving care and life-changing assistance to refugees forced to flee from war, persecution or natural disaster. At work today in over 40 countries and 29 cities in the United States, we restore safety, dignity and hope to millions who are uprooted and struggling to endure. The IRC leads the way from harm to home.

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