IRC Client Voice and Choice Initiative

Making the Case and Making the Difference: Strategies to Promote Client-Responsive Humanitarian Aid

Chloë Whitley, Alyoscia D'Onofrio, and Sheree Bennett
with additional contributions from Alice Hawkes and Gergey Pasztor

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INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

Table of Contents

1. A Commitment to Client Responsiveness

IRC2020 Strategy

In 2015 the IRC launched a bold new strategy, which seeks to make the organisation responsive to the people we serve. We have committed to systematically and deliberately seeking the perspectives of our key stakeholders – our clients and partners – and to drawing those perspectives into our decision making processes about what programmes to deliver, how, to whom, when, where and by whom. In doing so, we believe that our aid will become not only more responsive to the people our intended to benefit, but also more effective.

Responsiveness

Becoming responsive requires more than the establishment of a feedback mechanisms. It requires being more effective at listening, being better at interpreting and understanding our clients' perspectives (within the ecology of evidence available to us) when making our decisions, and in taking decisions which give those perspectives due weight and consideration. Becoming responsive means that our staff have to have the ability *and* the will do so. Becoming responsive requires wholesale change in the way that our staff think and act.

The IRC considers a programme to be client responsive when:

- <u>Design:</u> The programme team integrates a client-responsive approach to programming into programme design
- <u>Capture:</u> The programme team selects and implements a combination of channels to effectively capture the perspectives of its clients
- <u>Analysis & Interpretation:</u> The programme team analyses and interprets the implications of its clients' perspectives
- <u>Decision-Making:</u> The programme team systematically uses clients' perspectives in programme decision making
- <u>Action:</u> The programme team acts upon the decisions that it has taken about how to respond to its clients' perspectives
- <u>Accountability & Improvement:</u> The IRC team is accountable to its clients for its decisions and actions in response to heir perspectives and seeks continuous improvement to its responsiveness

Yet, within the IRC and the industry as a whole, we fail to systematically implement many of these actions.

Why the word "Client"?

The IRC has chosen to use the term "client" given the greater sense of agency that the word carries, as opposed to the more passive recipient of aid which the term "beneficiary" encompasses. Client is the term most commonly used in the service industry in a market context, where the recipients of a service are able to decide which provider they would like to seek a certain service from and to stop using a certain provider if it doesn't meet their expectations. Recipients of humanitarian aid frequently do not have a choice over the service provider and an ability to "walk away" if the quality of the service is not satisfactory. Our use of the term aims to be deliberately provocative in highlighting the current lack of power that many of our clients have, and our desire to transfer power to them. Finally, the word "beneficiary" assumes a benefit: we don't want to presume that our clients always benefit from our services: whether or not they benefit and how they might benefit more is precisely what we should be asking our clients.

Responsiveness: Increasing Client Voice and Choice

Recognising that the road towards responsiveness is paved with many hurdles, the IRC established a team of people – the Client Voice and Choice initiative (CVC) – with the mandate to identify, test and roll-out an approach for the organisation that would see our programmes becoming more responsive by 2020. Over the course of the past year, CVC has sought to identify what works (and what doesn't) when it comes to methods for collecting client perspectives: we've partnered with Ground Truth Solutions at Keystone Accountability to test their methodology in camps, rural areas and urban centres, amongst refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs) and host communities across South Sudan, southern Syria, Kenya and Greece. We've conversed with colleagues from across IRC field programmes, technical units, HR and senior management teams to understand the barriers to becoming responsive, and what conditions favour it. We held a Learning Exchange in March, bringing together IRC staff with major donors, implementing organisations and policy-focused teams. Drawing all this learning together, we're in the process of developing a framework to guide improved responsiveness in our programming.

Intended Contribution of this Paper

Numerous papers, people and organisations have long acknowledged the importance of feedback from intended beneficiaries. The list of mechanisms for capturing feedback is as long as the guidance documents that explain how to develop, use and maintain them. Significantly less focus has been placed on exploring the incentives or the 'will' that is required to turn collection of feedback into change in implementer decisions and behaviours. Therefore, this paper focuses on the role of motivations and incentives in our efforts to become more responsive as humanitarian actors. In seeking practical change, we propose what those motivations and incentives tend to be, how they play out in a range of programming scenarios. Most importantly, this paper offers a range of strategies that organisations like the IRC can employ in order to trigger and sustain more responsive behaviour.

Analysis of Current State

Many humanitarian organisations have established feedback mechanisms in the form of hotlines, suggestions boxes and some have used more proactive methods to solicit client feedback. Yet collecting feedback does not necessarily mean that feedback is used to influence programming decisions on a systematic level. (Jacobs, 2010[1]; Wood, 2011a[2]; b[3]; Anderson et al., 2012[4]; Twersky et al., 2013[5]). While many organisations have established formal and informal procedures, feedback mechanisms are only effective if they go beyond the collection and acknowledgement of feedback and actually support analysis and response to the feedback received (Bonino, Jean, Knox-Clarke, 2014)[6]. In general, humanitarian agencies do not systematically and deliberately use information from their beneficiaries in their decision-making processes about the assistance to provide, to whom, when, and how. Pockets of good practice exist but have not been tested at scale or generalized across contexts. For the humanitarian response system to be more

[1] Jacobs, A. (2010) 'Creating the missing feedback loop', in IDS Bulletin 41: 56-64. http://www.alnap.org/resource/8765.aspx
[2] Wood, A. (2011a) 'Overview of NGO – Community Complaints Mechanisms. Global Accountability Discussion Series 2'. Geneva: World Vision. http://www.alnap.org/resource/8768
[3] Wood, A. (2011b) 'The community context and complaints handling by NGOs'. Global accountability discussion series 1. Geneva: World Vision. http://www.alnap.org/resource/8769.aspx
[4] Anderson, M., Brown, D. and Jean, I. (2012) Time to listen: Hearing people on the receiving end of international aid. Cambridge: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects. http://www.alnap.org/ resource/8530
[5] Twersky, F; Buchanan, P and Threlfall, V. (2013) Listening to Those Who Matter Most, the Beneficiaries: http://ssir.org/articles/entry/listening_to_those_who_matter_most_the_beneficiaries#bio-footer
[6] Bonino, F. with Jean, I. and Knox Clarke, P. (2014) Humanitarian feedback mechanisms: research, evidence and guidance. ALNAP Study. London: ALNAP/ODI.

accountable to the populations it seeks to serve, it must better understand why feedback is not currently being used systematically in decision-making within agencies, and proactively take steps to encourage its use.

2. Making the Case

Consequences of Not Being Responsive

There are a number of consequences associated with *not* being responsive, including:
Wasting time, energy and resources: If we do not take the opinions of our clients into account when making decisions, then we run the risk of delivering programmes which are not supported by our clients and which they may actively oppose, or simply that our assistance isn't doesn't turn out to be as effective as it otherwise could be. This is both a waste of resources and a wasted opportunity.

Damaging the relationship with clients: If we do not actively seek out the perspectives of our clients, act upon their feedback and "close the loop" with them – report back to them on what we're doing and why – then we miss the opportunity to build a trusting and productive relationship with our clients, and worse we might even undermine and threaten our relationships with them. This can have serious consequences for programming, but also for the safety and security of staff working amongst clients.

Doing harm: If we are not responsive, we run the risk of doing harm to our clients, by delivering programming which is sub-optimally appropriate either in its aims or its methodology. Without close and regular communication with our clients we are less likely to hear the quieter voices of those who are already vulnerable, and our programming may overlook information that we would otherwise have been aware of if we had listened to our clients better.

Not Being Responsive - Illustration 1:

During the first few years of the conflict, non-food item kits (NFIs) were distributed to refugees arriving from over the border. Whilst the kits met international standards, the items they contained were not culturally appropriate – something that the humanitarian agencies would have known had they asked their clients what the kits should contain. Most of the families receiving the kits instead sold them on in return for cash, which they used to meet their needs in the way they preferred. Whilst humanitarian programming in the region was eventually adapted to prioritise cash distributions instead of NFI kits, this course correction took many years to take effect. Had the humanitarian agencies asked clients what type of assistance they would best prefer, then we might have avoided years of sub-optimally effective aid.

Not Being Responsive - Illustration 2:

The breastfeeding clinic in the camp had been repeatedly vandalised in protest for the humanitarian agency's lack of willingness to provide mothers with young babies with formula milk. All the evidence backs up the use of breastmilk as being better for the baby, and in the uncertain situation that the refugees find themselves in, breastmilk provides a more reliable source of food for the baby. Yet, the mothers preferred and were used to using formula. In this case, the humanitarian agency knew what clients thought, but chose to act otherwise: sometimes client perspectives clash with our humanitarian agencies' own ideas about what is best, but such are the consequences of not recognising their preferences.

Not Being Responsive - Illustration 3:

One team of a humanitarian agency conducted a survey with clients which found that they were generally very happy with the organisation's services, but desperately wanted the new toilet and shower block to be installed: there were only four toilets available for men and four for women for a camp of 800. The clients had been repeatedly telling this to the project team, but had received no information on whether and when the new block would be installed. One client reported: "I am human. I am educated. I don't expect too much. But no one asks my opinion; I have no information." Another team at the same time negotiated with a donor the go-ahead to build a theatre in the same camp. This really emphasises the importance of communication within the humanitarian agency: it may be that the clients will be very welcoming of theatre, but unless a response is given about what the humanitarian agency is doing to progress with the WASH block building, the theatre may not receive its intended welcome.

Not Being Responsive - Illustration 4:

Prioritising the needs and perspectives of women and girls, one agency neglected to seek out the perspectives of single men about the assistance that they might need. The agency didn't hear the calls of these men for blankets, and instead concentrated its assistance to women and girls. The agency later found that some of the men had been stealing blankets from the women's block. This generated a high level of mistrust and suspicion amongst the camp population. In seeking to be client responsive it is important that humanitarian agencies listen to all their clients, for excluding the voices of one group can result in harm being done to them but also to those who the humanitarian agency prioritised.

Benefits of Being Responsive

Yet, when humanitarian organisations are responsive, there are numerous benefits to humanitarian organisations and clients alike.

Improving the effectiveness of humanitarian programmes: Research suggests that responsiveness improves quality, effectiveness and impact.[7] [8] [9] The IRC's own experience has shown us that client responsiveness can have a significant benefit to programmatic impact, by contributing to:

- Better problem analysis: client perspectives provide humanitarian agencies with a better understanding of what problems are, how they manifest themselves and what causes them – thus strengthening the *relevance* of programming.
- Clarification on what "success" should be: client perspectives provides a better understanding of what the intended outcomes of humanitarian programming should be in relation to those identified problems: this helps agencies to communicate to their key stakeholders (clients, partners, donors and others) what they are aiming to achieve and it enables them to determine a shared vision amongst programme teams.
- Demonstrating and helping humanitarian agencies to measure success: clients' perspectives are both an important source of information to verify humanitarian agencies' own indicators of success, as well as providing an *alternate* measure of success: talking to clients allows agencies to better measure progress towards the achievement of intended outcomes, particularly those which are hard to measure and where the meaning or observable manifestation is contextually defined, such as social cohesion, trust and empowerment.

[7] Bonino, F. with Jean, I. and Knox Clarke, P. (2014) Humanitarian feedback mechanisms: research, evidence and guidance. ALNAP Study. London: ALNAP/ODI.
[8] Featherstone, A. (2013) Improving Impact: Do Accountability Mechanisms Deliver Results http://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/accountability-impact-report-2013.pdf
[9] World Vision UK, INTRAC, SIMLab (2016) Accountability. http://www.worldvision.org.uk/our-work/accountability/

- Prompting humanitarian agencies to challenge their assumptions and test their theories of change: through capturing client perspectives humanitarian agencies are able to challenge their own assumptions about the causality of their interventions.
- Providing information upon which to adapt programmes: the humanitarian sector is moving away from linear, log frame-based approaches to project management. Client perspectives are a great source of management information for humanitarian decision makers to use when determining whether and how to adapt programmes.
- Allowing humanitarian agencies to capture the unintended impacts of their programmes: whether the impacts are positive or negative, clients' perspectives allow agencies to verify whether their programmes are having impacts which are different to their intention or in addition to those intended (also see the point above about testing assumptions).
- Empowering clients: by routinely asking clients for their perspectives they may come to feel that they have the capacity to change something about the way that they live; by this small exchange of power client responsiveness can empower clients to take control over their own futures. Humanitarian action is about more than saving lives; it's about restoring dignity to people who have lost a lot through conflict and disaster. By treating people as humans with valid perspectives that we want to hear, we can restore some level of dignity and control.

Improving accountability and trust between humanitarian organisations and clients: It should come as no surprise that one of the most compelling reasons for client responsiveness is based upon the fact that the practices of listening to and responding to client feedback promote trust of our clients in humanitarian agencies, and strengthen their ability to hold us accountable for our actions. It does this by:

- Providing clients with a voice: responsiveness provides a range of accessible channels through which clients can share their views. The private sector treats the "client" as paramount. Why do we not? Responsiveness places the client in the position that they should have.
- Ensuring we close the loop: responsiveness requires providing an established system through which humanitarian actors report back to clients on their feedback has influenced decisions and actions.
- Generating trust: when we listen, act, and report back to clients then we increase their ability to trust is. This is valuable: they will be more likely to share information with us in the future, participate and cooperate.

Putting "Protection" at the centre of programming: By systematically listening to clients humanitarian agencies will gain a much greater understanding of their clients' perspectives about how they would like services delivered. This information is vitally important for us in knowing how to ensure that our programmes do not cause harm, and promote safe access to all clients, their dignity and their ability to secure their rights.

Remaining relevant (and therefore competitive): The US Government and DFID require their implementing partners to demonstrate whether and how they are being responsive to affected populations. Where these two major humanitarian donors lead, others will follow. If humanitarian agencies are responsive they will be more likely to:

- Secure competitive grants and contracts from these donors: if our management methods facilitate more responsive programming, we will be better able to convince donors that our proposed project will achieve the outcomes that it proposes and will build trust and sustained benefit to the humanitarian community's relationship with its clients.
- Adhere to their reporting and compliance requirements: As discussed above, responsive practices can help us

to better manage performance and demonstrate performance and compliance with donor requirements in our reporting and communication. This gives donors assurance that their funds are being used to good effect.

Strengthening ability to manage risk: Operating in contexts where governance systems are weak or non-existent, it will come as no surprise that fraud and corruption are palpable risks that humanitarian actors have to carefully assess and manage in order to ensure that their aid reaches the right people. Being responsive can help humanitarian actors to manage that risk, by:

- Providing timely information about who is receiving aid: Clients can give humanitarian agencies up-to-date information about where clients think aid is going. When some are trying their very best to avoid detection of their misuse of funds, this "ear to the ground" can provide a useful clue and trigger for further investigation.
- Providing a channel through which complaints and reports of abuse and corruption can be reported: By establishing trust with clients and known ways for them to communicate with humanitarian actors, it is more likely that clients will report to us any malpractice that they observe.

Generating professional reward and wellbeing amongst staff: The wellbeing of staff is paramount for any humanitarian organisation: staff often live and work in extremely challenging contexts, where their own health and safety are sometimes at risk. A powerful counter to this is the feedback that those staff receive from clients, hearing and witnessing that their work is appreciated and is having an impact. Responsiveness can be rewarding for staff by:

- Providing staff with real-time feedback on the impact of their work on clients' lives: This provides staff with often mostly very positive feedback about how their work is making a difference, which can be gratifying for staff. Quite often only front line staff are able to benefit from this exchange. By more systematically capturing clients' views and channelling them up the chain of command, all staff will have the benefit of hearing that feedback. This goes for donor staff to, who are often particularly removed from the difference that their work is making.
- Helping them to feel more confident that their efforts are making a difference: This is closely related to the above, but different: by obtaining clients' perspectives on what needs to change then they can be more assured that they're adapting their work in the right way.

Being Responsive - Illustration 1:

A real time evaluation was conducted following an emergency response to an influx of refugees. The report highlighted that client feedback to the agency had revealed suspected abuse of the code of conduct of the agency in question: clients reported that the agency's staff had been asking them for money in exchange for emergency non-food item kits. Feedback from clients obtained during routine evaluations can help humanitarian agencies to identify issues of non-compliance and help them to manage risks.

Being Responsive - Illustration 2:

A humanitarian agency intended to build latrines adapted to enable persons with disabilities and the elderly with mobility problems to use them. After asking for their preferences for the service, the agency found that the intended clients would prefer bed pans and commode chairs and adapted the plans for the service accordingly. Had the agency gone ahead with its original plans without checking, there is a risk that the service would not have been used and the dignity of the intended clients compromised.

Being Responsive - Illustration 3:

Following several rounds of surveys, the project team reported what a difference it had made to their approach to programming. The feedback challenged their pre-existing assumptions about what services they should deliver and how. Previously they had made decisions on behalf of their clients: that was their understanding of "being responsive". Once they had a chance to understand their clients' perspectives on the services and started responding to those perspectives in their programme implementation, participation, access and utilisation of their services increased.

Being Responsive - Illustration 4:

A humanitarian agency had attested that because their programme was implemented in and through the community, safety was not an issue that they needed to concern themselves with. But they decided to check-in with their clients anyway. Their clients reported that they did indeed have concerns about safety which were preventing some of them from accessing the service. When the team enquired further they found out that their clients were concerned about the threats of wild animals and drunken men that they might encounter when walking through the bush at night to access the service. The humanitarian organisation in response worked with the clients to identify what they could do as a community to protect themselves. Responsiveness does not always involve the humanitarian agency being the one who has to "take action": often the solutions can be found with the clients themselves, if they are asked.

3. Making the Difference

Introduction

In this section we outline three mutually-reinforcing goals which this paper proposes humanitarian organisations committed to improving client responsiveness seek to achieve:

1. **Improve the flow of information about client perspectives *into* and *within* humanitarian organisations**
2. **Improve processes for deciding how to respond to client perspectives within humanitarian organisations**
3. **Motivate and incentivise humanitarian staff in favour of client responsiveness**

For each of these goals we outline its rationale, propose strategies to achieve, and we sketch out the investment case.

Goal 1: Improve the flow of information about client perspectives into and within humanitarian organisations

Justification:

In order for humanitarian organisations to be able to be responsive, they must be able to have up-to-date, comprehensive, clear information about their clients' perspectives on a full range of issues relevant to their programming and operations. This requires getting the information *into* humanitarian organisations in the first place, and ensuring that it is appropriately transmitted or circulated *within* humanitarian organisations.

Staff have to be able to trust the information that they have as being reliable and relevant, if they are to make their programming decisions on the basis of it (or at least informed by it). Information in the form of client perspectives also needs to be considered to have the same value and validity as other sources of information.

The strategies which follow outline a number of ways in which humanitarian organisations can strengthen the quality of information and ensure that it reaches the right people, at the right time and in the right way.

Strategies:

Strategy 1:	**Strengthen or establish proactive channels through which humanitarian organisations can become aware of their clients' perspectives**
Description	This strategy recommends establishing or strengthening existing channels through which client perspectives can be proactively sought. Such channels are deliberately designed to allow for focused engagement with clients. These include focus groups, photo narratives (captured by clients), journals, piloting surveys etc.
Effect	These channels are developed for the specific purpose of engaging clients at key points within programme design and implementation. Particularly if established early in conjunction with clients, these channels are more likely to be seen as accessible and well intentioned. Information obtained through these channels is likely to be particularly relevant to the programme team, ensures that a wide range of voices can be captured, and allows for the team to explore solutions as well as problems with clients (as the programme team has control in deciding what and who to ask and when).
Investment	Developing these channels requires significant resources – preliminary engagements with clients requires identifying them, ensuring balance and representativeness. It also requires staff with facilitation capacity, linguistic and cultural proficiency. Personnel with good data management and analysis skills are also required. Most importantly, they require repeated and consistent in-person engagement to develop trust in both the channels and the people behind them. Trade-offs exist between dedicating time and resources to these channels (and potentially to failing at it a few times) and just getting on with programme design and implementation as it makes sense to the agency that is also pressed to meet donor reporting timelines. There is also a trade-off between collecting this information through these channels and collecting data through the usual needs assessment surveys which are usually standardised and easier to administer.

Strategy 2:	**Strengthen or establish reactive channels through which humanitarian organisations can become aware of their clients' perspectives**
Description	In this strategy a humanitarian agency establishes or strengthens an existing "reactive" channels for accessing client perspectives. Such channels include complaint boxes, hotlines and bulletin boards, and allow clients to voice complaints or raise issues during the course of a programme if and when they wish. More engaging reactive channels are accountability or feedback committees (which are established within service or operations areas and are open to the public on a given day of the week) and complaints officers (these are programme monitors who are known as the persons to whom complaints may be raised in confidence). These channels are "always on" and as such ensure that clients' perspectives can reach the agency at any point during the programme.
Effect	These channels allow some access to clients but if they are framed as complaints mechanisms, they only allow for some types of information to be shared and gathered. Information hotlines respond to the need for accurate information, which may assist in addressing smaller short-term issues.
Investment	Establishing the mechanism requires, time, staff capacity, training and maintenance. In the case of the more engaging reactive channels, relationships must be built or a certain type of staff must be chosen for these positions in order for clients to feel comfortable revealing their complaints and issues.
Strategy 3:	**Strengthen or establish open channels through which the humanitarian organisation can become aware of its clients' perspectives**
Description	In this strategy the humanitarian agency systematically harnesses the feedback that it hears through the day to day interaction with their clients in the field. Information is obtained from clients either during the course of programme activities or through casual communication with clients.
Effect	In some ways, this is the least intrusive yet most direct way of engaging clients. However, it is highly dependent on the quality of relationships, the direct presence of the implementers, and on having a robust system for recording and communicating the information from the person who heard it to the rest of the team and to the programme decision maker(s).

Investment	Emphasis is placed not on the structure and form of the channel but on the process for dealing with the information that emerges from it. While the channels may be informal and ad hoc, staff must have a system for logging and assessing the information that comes in and escalating it for consideration in decision-making. Additional staff resources and capacity are not necessarily required however, without a formal system of aggregating and analysing this information, there is a risk that it is treated as anecdotal and is not given the weight that information collected through proactive and reactive channels would receive. On the other hand, there is also the risk that anecdotal information that emerges organically in the relationships between client sand implementers is used to make decisions even if that information is not representative of a cross-section of client perspectives.

Strategy 4:	**Improve communication of clients' perspectives up / down and across the humanitarian organisation**
Description	We talk about humanitarian organisations obtaining information from clients about what they think, and humanitarian organisations taking decisions on the basis of those (which we come to in the next section). But the individual or team who may hear the perspectives of the organisation's clients may not be the same person or team who takes decisions on how to respond. This strategy thus advocates improving the flow of communication *within* the organisation, both vertically up and down the hierarchy and also across teams within the organisation.
Effect	The establishment or strengthening of such channels of communication can be of benefit for transmitting client perspectives from one staff member to another, but by strengthening these modes of communication other information can also pass more effectively. As much valuable information about client perspectives is not received "when humanitarian agencies are asking questions", but only in the informal interactions between teams and clients, strengthening the communication within agencies enables information on client perspectives to reach the right people at the right time.
Investment	This requires a number of linked investments, including empowering more junior staff members (usually the ones interacting with clients on a day to day basis) to share what they have heard with their team members and seniors; raising awareness and advocating towards more senior staff members to ask their field staff what they have heard from clients; setting up communication channels such as end-of-the-day check-in meetings where field staff can share with the team lead what they have heard during the day.

Strategy 5:	**Improve presentation of client perspectives such that they can be understood and their implications easily determined**
Description	This strategy involves providing information about client perspectives in formats appropriate to the different people and teams within humanitarian organisations that are taking programming decisions. I is likely that programme leads would require detailed and qualitative information to allow them to develop a clear understanding of what their clients think and how to respond; whereas country management or organisational management would need client perspectives presented in the aggregate allowing them to identify trends and particular problem areas to be addressed.
Effect	This strategy ensure that programme decision makers in humanitarian organisations have exactly the information that they need, at the right level of detail, and at the right time to allow them to take decisions.
Investment	This would require ascertaining what presentation format is most suited to decision makers at different levels of the organisation (taking types of different decisions), and then producing template formats which can be used and adapted by the programme teams capturing client perspectives.

Goal 2: Improve processes for deciding how to respond to client perspectives within humanitarian organisations

Justification:

Once equipped with trusted information about its clients' perspectives, presented at the right time in the right way, a humanitarian organisation must then decide what to do on the basis of that information. Rather, individuals or teams made up of individuals take decisions on how to respond.

The decisions that humanitarian organisations take can be informal and implicit / hidden, or formal and explicit. There are also "small" and "big" decisions. The "small" decisions are often taken more informally, often implicitly. "Big" decisions are usually taken in more formal settings and are taken explicitly. Regard these two hypothetical illustrations:

1. A field staff member receives a piece of feedback from a client through the course of delivering an activity: the client expresses that she particularly enjoys the sewing activity offered at the women's centre in the camp. The next day, the field staff member spends an extra half an hour with the women's group on the sewing activity, but after that returns to the original activity schedule. She didn't think it necessary to communicate the decision to her colleagues or supervisors – she may not even have been aware that she was taking a decision, the change was so minor.
2. The programme management team meet for the quarterly progress review of the project. They review the client feedback that has been obtained through the recent survey from the women's centre, which asks the participants which of the activities that are offered they enjoy the most. The survey results indicate that the majority of the participants prefer the computer skills training, with the reading classes a close second and the sewing activity the least preferred. The programme team consider the available evidence from the market assessment, which indicates that computer skills won't be in significant demand. They decide to emphasise reading skills in the women's centre timetable as the evidence has shown that improved literacy can lead to greater empowerment and livelihoods opportunities. The programme coordinator also has an education background, and from his experience knows how beneficial reading skills are, even if clients are not initially aware that they need them. The team decides to maintain the time spent on computer skills, and reduce the time for the sewing activity. The programme management team informed the field staff member responsible for the women's centre to implement the new timetable.

In these examples, decisions were taken in response to clients' feedback, but by people with differing levels of power, with differences in formality and apparent significance. However, it should be noted that the aggregate of a number of "small" decisions can have as great an effect as the "bigger" decisions: continual adaptations and improvisations by the field staff member over time can have as much significance as the "formal" decision taken at the quarterly review meeting. In seeking to be responsive, it is important that humanitarian organisations better understand and strengthen both these types of decision making processes, so that they can have a clearer understanding of whether they are being responsive to their clients and how.

The strategies below outline the questions that humanitarian organisations should ask themselves about how decisions are currently taken in their organisations, and recommend changes to be introduced or processes to be strengthened to ensure that decisions about how to respond to client perspectives are taken by the right people, at the right time and in the right way.

Strategies:

Strategy 1:	**Establish authority and accountability for different types and levels of decision making**
Description	As the illustrations in the section above show, many different decisions are taken in humanitarian organisations without a full and clear understanding of who is taking decisions and on what. This strategy involves: identifying who should be taking decisions and on what (that is, what authority do they have for taking decisions about how to design / deliver the programme, as informed by client perspectives); identifying who in the team holds those decision makers to account, and making others in the team aware of with whom these roles and responsibilities lie.

Effect	The effect of this strategy is to clarify decision making responsibility and authority within the programme: it empowers programme staff to know which decisions they can and should be taking about how to respond to their clients' perspectives, and ensures that decisions of significance are taken by those with appropriate levels of authority. In the illustration above, when the field staff member hears a piece of feedback from a client as regards her preference for one activity or another, she will know what authority she has to adapt the project and to what degree.
Investment	This strategy can be applied incrementally within an organisation: a single programme team could identify the levels of authority and accountability of different people within their programme, as long as the programme lead is fully aware of what authority and accountabilities he (or she) has and can thus assign within his (or her) team. At an organisational level, some basic principles for authority can be identified, but given the differences in team structure from one programme to another, one country programme to another or region, blueprints clearly should not be used.

Strategy 2:	**Establish processes for guiding decision makers on selecting information to be considered, and in fairly weighing-up client perspectives alongside other information in decision making**
Description	We are well aware that client perspectives compete for the attention of decision-makers alongside numerous other sources of information and influence. Client perspectives may also often contradict other inputs. For example, when client perspectives captured by the humanitarian organisation reveal a preference for computer skills training, anecdotal feedback from one client indicated a preference for reading classes, yet the market assessment and available evidence suggested that reading classes should be emphasised, and the experience of the programme coordinator supported that, what is the process through which the programme management team decides which activity to emphasise in the timetable? This strategy involves outlining a clear process through which programme teams may identify the information which they are using to take decisions, and documenting their rationale for the information favoured and the outcome of the decision. Checklists or standard agendas may be used, to assist programme teams in verifying that they have taken client perspectives into consideration as well as other necessary information inputs. Scenario-based guidance may be provided to assure standardisation / repeatability in the way that decision makers weigh up client perspectives alongside other information sources. Formats may be provided to help decision makers in recording the decision that they have taken.
Effect	The effect of this strategy is to promote the value of client perspectives in decision making, to ensure that they are given their due alongside other information inputs used by decision makers, and to assist programme decision makers in being accountable for the decisions that they have taken.
Investment	The investment required in this strategy is relatively high, as it requires identifying and developing the tools / resources to serve programme team during decision making processes, and to quality assure that they are being used appropriately.

Strategy 3:	**Establish processes for transparency and communication of decisions**
Description	This strategy involves first identifying when, how and in what fora decisions are taken. Then, as regards informal decision making processes, this strategy involves exposing these processes so that the humanitarian organisation can become more conscious of the decisions taken therein and better able to trace the (aggregate) impact of those decisions. As regards the more formal decision making processes, this strategy proposes that humanitarian organisations improve the transparency and communication around those processes and the decisions taken within them.
Effect	The effect of this strategy is to make informal decisions more transparent and ensure that they are communicated to colleagues and supervisors, such that their (aggregate) impact can be tracked; and to ensure that formal decisions and the rationale behind them are appropriately communicated amongst the team and to clients, promoting accountability. To take the illustration, this effect of this strategy would be that the field staff member working in the women's centre would have a clear understanding of when and how to communicate to her team the feedback that she has heard from the client, and the recommendation that she has for how to adapt the activity timetable. The programme management team will know how and when to communicate back to the clients of the women's centre that they have decided to emphasise the reading skills in the timetable and why.
Investment	The investment required by this strategy is quite significant, as it requires a humanitarian organisation to explore and develop and understanding of its decision making processes, and to agree the degree of transparency in decision making that they feel comfortable with.

Goal 3: Motivate and incentivise humanitarian staff in favour of client responsiveness

Justification:

Organisations, like the IRC, commit to being responsive to their clients and other key stakeholders. But it is the individuals that make up those organisations that take and implement the decisions that will make responsiveness` a reality. Both motivation and incentives play a fundamental role in determining how responsive those individuals – the field staff of humanitarian organisations who take decisions about the programmatic and operational delivery of their assistance to clients – will be. This paper will identify the primary motivators and incentives at play in the humanitarian context, and it will present the strategies – or combination of strategies that we recommend senior decision makers in humanitarian organisations pay most attention to and invest in.

Motivation is the *internal* drive within a person: the intrinsic reasons for that person to want to take a certain decision or behave in a certain way. There are certain motivators which seem to be important for *all* people in their work. Those motivators which prompt individuals to *want* to take responsibility for the success or failure of their work include:

- **Value:** the belief that the activity is important or fulfils a personal value and the ability to see the benefits of the work
- **Autonomy:** the control over one's actions and the responsibility for delivering results;
- **Creativity:** the ability to bring one's own ideas to the activity;
- **Growth:** the improvement of a professional skill set, and the opportunity to learn

Incentives may be defined as the *external* factors – the possibility of promotion, compensation or of negative consequences – which influence a person to take a decision or behave in a certain way. As soon as the incentive is taken away, the desire to take the decision or behave in a certain way stops. Often an incentive may offer both the opportunity of reward or penalty at the same time, depending on the action which is taken: "If you do X then you will be offered the reward". However: "If you do not do X, then you will be penalised".

The level of reward or penalty is also clearly important in determining the degree to which it influences a decision. For example: "If you do X (an action which you perhaps aren't intrinsically motivated to do) then you will receive $1 million", is certainly more alluring than if the prospective reward is $10. The principle applies to penalties as well. This example is not to suggest that money is the only incentive, but it is clearly one of the primary ones and is used to provide this illustration. Incentives include:

- **Donor funding** (including compliance with their requirements in that this influences prospects of payment and future funding)
- **Job security and compensation**
- **Reputation** (individual and organisational)
- **Effort / Reward** (promotion)
- **Managing risk**

Strategies:

Strategy 1:	**Humanitarian organisations' senior leadership prioritise and require client responsiveness of their staff**
Description	The humanitarian organisation commits to improving the responsiveness of its programmes, and its leadership communicates that commitment to senior management in the regions and country programmes as being a priority and a requirement, against which their performance will be assessed.
Effect	This would act as an external incentive to be more responsive, whereby regional and country management would pass down this message in turn to their field staff as it is their performance which will determine whether leadership assesses satisfactory performance of the regions and countries.
Investment	Messaging requires minimal resources. However, it does require decisions to be taken as to how client responsiveness is prioritised in relation to other commitments and objectives. For if leadership are communicating that all are a priority, then this will leave the decision back in the hands of regional and country management as where to invest their time and attention.

Strategy 2:	**Donors prioritise and require client responsiveness of humanitarian organisations**
Description	The US and UK Governments have already committed to client responsiveness (under the heading of Accountability to Affected Populations); other donors are following suit. These donors are requiring that their implementing partners demonstrate in proposals and reporting how they are being responsive. Donors could go even further than this, in indicating proportions of budgets and staff time and effort that should be devoted to responsiveness.
Effect	The prospect of receiving or losing funding is one of the major incentives which influence field staff decisions, particularly those in programme or country management positions. Donor prioritisation of client responsiveness can thus have quite a significant effect on humanitarian organisations' behaviour.
Investment	The investment made by humanitarian agencies is in meeting donor requirements and addressing their priorities. The strategy itself of prioritisation *by the donor* requires investment on the part of the donor to reflect this in their funding requirements and regulations, and for holding humanitarian agencies to account for compliance.

Strategy 3:	**Increase the capacity of humanitarian organisation staff to be client responsive**
Description	Provide field staff with the tools to be more responsive: with the understanding and practical resources to help them to design an approach, collect client perspectives, analyse and interpret them, take decisions based upon them, act upon them and review whether those actions had the intended benefit. Dedicate a certain allocation of time for key programme staff in field offices to implement those steps.
Effect	By making it easier for field staff to implement these actions, this strategy will act as an incentive as the time and effort required to produce a desired result will be reduced.
Investment	The level of investment required will depend on the current level of capacity of an organisation: the investment required to develop and disseminate tools will generate a significant reward. However, investment in additional staff time requires additional funding, or requires time and effort that has previously been devoted to other commitments to be allocated to responsive practices.

Strategy 4:	**Strengthen the evidence base for the benefits of being client responsive**
Description	Notwithstanding the contribution of the few studies previously mentioned which illustrate that client responsiveness does improve quality, effectiveness and impact, there is still relatively little evidence to demonstrate the ways in which client responsiveness improves programming. Further, field staff often don't have access to this information. Strategy 4 recommends that this evidence is obtained, and made available to field staff in their decisions.
Effect	This would have a motivational effect, as field staff would be better able to see how client responsive programming contributes to their added value / their ability to make a difference to the lives of people affected by conflict and disaster.
Investment	This would require a high level of investment in terms of time, money and capabilities required to produce this type of research and ensure that it is disseminated across field teams.

Strategy 5:	**Make client responsiveness a requirement in staff performance management**
Description	In this strategy, the performance of field staff is assessed in relation to the degree to which they are exhibiting responsive skills and behaviours. An organisation defines what the key skills and behaviours are, identifies levels of performance and appropriate measures to strengthen performance, and on a routine and periodic basis with their managers they together assess how responsive they are.
Effect	This would serve to motivate both staff to increase responsive behaviours, particularly if they know that responsiveness is tied to reputational or concrete benefits such as awards, merit increases etc. It is also a mechanisms for further identifying opportunities for capacity and professional development.
Investment	This requires medium investment as organizations would need to expand their current performance management system to include a section on responsiveness; managers would need to develop ways to observe, record or verify the responsiveness of their staff and resources for compensation, awards or professional development need to be included in personnel budgets.

Strategy 6:	**Assess performance of programmes in how responsive they are being to their clients**
Description	This strategy includes the assessment of the design and implementation of a portfolio of projects. The 'programme' could be a set of projects funded by the same donor or a combination of projects developed and conducted by a specific team in a given context e.g. a country programme team. The assessment examines programme management practices such as the engagement of clients in programme / project design, the establishment of feedback mechanisms (for each project or across projects) and the use of feedback in decision-making throughout the programme cycle. Programme performance would be evaluated by the donor who funds the entire programme or by a supervisory unit to which the programme team reports.
Effect	Unlike strategy 5 above, by focusing on programme performance management, this strategy shifts the incentives of entire teams or units. Since performance does not depend on the efforts of one individual but rather collective efforts across individuals and sub-units, there is a greater incentive to establish processes and systems to facilitate and ensure responsive behaviour more generally.
Investment	The investment is low for the donor who would need to specify how and when programme performance would be assessed for responsiveness, giving comparable weight to this dimension of performance as to others such as financial and legal compliance. The investment is high for management teams and for the technical teams supporting them, as they would need to coordinate their planning processes, allocate funding, capacity and time to establish reliable methods for collecting and analysing data and engaging clients in interpreting both the data and discussing implications for the programme. Most importantly, it requires adaptive and agile systems that will allow for course correction and communication and negotiation of shifts in programming with donors. Supervisory units would need to develop performance metrics and a process for assessing and updating them.

Strategy 7:	**Leverage the desire of humanitarian organisations for a positive reputation amongst their peers**
Description	The goal of this strategy is to examine responsiveness across organizations or agencies. Each humanitarian agency would publicly provide information on how it demonstrates responsiveness in its implementation and management. Ideally, this information would be provided in a way such that processes and performance can be compared across organizations. In making this comparative information public, agencies become open to scrutiny by donors, governments, peer organisations and most importantly by the clients they intend to serve.
Effect	The intended effect of this level of transparency is to increase the reputational risk of non-responsive behaviours and to stimulate competition among agencies towards greater levels of responsiveness. No organisation wants to be known as unresponsive or disrespectful of its clients' preferences. Similarly, if agencies perceive that more transparent and responsive organizations are more likely to be favoured or rewarded by donors, governments and clients, then these agencies are more likely to go the extra mile to be responsive.
Investment	The investment required is high. For all agencies, it requires reliable functional systems for engaging with clients and using that information to make changes in programmes. It also requires a common platform through which al agencies can report on their processes. A credible and objective third party would need to develop and host the platform and determine the criteria and metrics for reporting on responsiveness.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we outlined a rationale for why humanitarian organisations should not only *commit* to client responsiveness, but *follow through* with investment in changes to their capacity, systems and incentive structures.

The benefits of being responsive to the perspectives of our clients are significant, and the consequences of not being so can significantly undermine the effectiveness of our interventions and alienate the people we seek to serve. As a sector we need to move beyond current state: beyond the overly mechanistic use of feedback mechanisms, capturing far too much information which we never use, and the opacity in which our decisions are currently taken. In order to do this we need to take proactive steps towards reform.

We outlined three goals for humanitarian organisations intent on realising that change in their organisations:

1. Improve the flow of information about client perspectives *into* and *within* humanitarian organisations
2. Improve processes for deciding how to respond to client perspectives within humanitarian organisations
3. Motivate and incentivise humanitarian staff in favour of client responsiveness

The paper presented a range of strategies, which we believe could make the difference to the status quo. These strategies ranged from the small investments needed to clarify accountabilities within an individual team, to greater investments in strengthening the capacity of teams to capture the perspectives of their clients proactively and systematically throughout the course of their programming.

These strategies are based upon ideas that we have had through the course of the past year of seeking to make the IRC more client responsive. The strategies require further development, testing and refinement through use. We hope that these ideas can be useful to those working to improve humanitarian assistance. Feedback and ideas on this paper are welcomed: we hope that it can serve as the basis for productive discussion within humanitarian organisations, and across the sector as a whole.

Chloë Whitley
Senior Coordinator, Client Responsiveness at the International Rescue Committee

chloe.whitley@rescue.org