Guidance to Present, Interpret and Respond to Client Feedback

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The Guidance to Present, Interpret and Respond to Client Feedback provides advice and support to IRC country teams in achieving the IRC Good and Great Standards and most of the associated Good and Great Practices for Client Responsiveness.

Why use it?

This Guidance provides a framework to categorize different types of information, client feedback and complaints collected by teams through proactive, reactive and open Feedback Channels (see definition in the first section of the Guidance below), as well as advice on how to interpret and make decisions informed by feedback and perspectives collected from our clients. It also provides general advice and practical guidance on how we can "Close the Loop", meaning how we should communicate the IRC response to clients and other stakeholders who have shared their feedback with us. This guidance is thus critical for teams to achieve the Good and Great Standards and associated Good and Great Practices. More specifically it supports the achievement of Good Practice #2 at the Design phase, Good Practices #2 and 3 and Great Practice #1 at the Start-up phase, Good Practices #2 and 3 and Great Practice #1 at the Start-up phase, Good Practices #2 and 3 and Great Practice #1 at the Implementation phase and all the Good (#1 and 2) and Great Practices (#1) at the Close-out phase.

When to use it?

This Guidance is to be used before teams start collecting feedback from their clients and after they have selected and designed their feedback channels. Teams should be prepared to receive information other than feedback on IRC services such as request for information, assistance, protection or sensitive complaints that will need to be acted upon (and may need, for this purpose, to be referred internally or externally) within the time agreed.

How to use it?

Beyond the general advice related to presenting, interpreting, and responding to client feedback (including when to report a complaint to the Ethics and Compliance Unit (ECU), this Guidance provides teams with a categorization of different type of information and feedback that should be used to define roles and responsibilities, as well as the referral pathways to ensure that different types of request, feedback and complaints received (e.g. request for information, programmatic complaints, allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse, etc.) are presented within the adequate timeframe to the relevant staff/ unit. It also provides a framework to select the appropriate channels to respond (Close the Loop) to the different types of feedback, requests and complaints received by the IRC from clients.

Overview

This is a step-by-step Guidance to support country teams to compile and present different types of information provided through feedback channels and, if needed, refer them to the right unit in a timely manner. It also includes advice on how to interpret contradicting information, and to identify the appropriate channels to communicate the IRC response to our clients. This Guidance also includes a link to a short note on Safety and Ethical Considerations for Sensitive Complaints, as well as Guidance on Reporting to the Ethics & Compliance Unit

The Guidance Note is accompanied by:

- Annex 1: Response Channel Selection Framework (to Close the Loop)
- Annex 2: Strengths and Weaknesses of the Different Channels and Contextual/Operational Considerations
- Annex 3: Guidance on Reporting to the Ethics & Compliance Unit

Important Note

It is critical that country teams define referral pathways, including clear roles and responsibilities about who will handle different categories of information, before they roll out proactive and reactive channels. This will ensure that when the team starts receiving client feedback, requests and complaints, it has the protocols in place to ensure that all feedback is presented and interpreted to inform its decisions and that it is able to communicate the IRC response to our clients. Failing to do that will hamper the effectiveness of the feedback cycle and negatively affect the trust and confidence of the IRC's clients

The process for **Presenting, Interpreting and Responding to Client Feedback** is divided into three steps:

1. Compiling and Presenting Client Feedback and other information received through feedback channels
2. Interpreting Client Feedback and Making Decisions
3. Explaining and Discussing the IRC response to Client Feedback

Your outputs will be:

A. Clear referral pathways/ roles and responsibilities on how to handle different categories of information, feedback and complaints.

B. Understanding how to interpret and make decisions when there is contradictory information and differences in data collected.

C. Mapping of the different communication channels that teams can use to communicate the IRC response to our clients.

1. Compiling and Presenting Client Feedback

1.1. Compiling Client Feedback and other information received through feedback channels

Client feedback, requests and complaints cannot be addressed in a systematic way if it isn't documented. Developing a system to document and store feedback ensures that the relevant people are able to access it. The system developed should be aware of the fact that certain kinds of information must be kept confidential. As proper feedback documentation starts at the field level, the following table offers guidance for field staff receiving feedback from clients.

Type of feedback	Description	How to compile/ record data	Tips and advice
Open feedback	Feedback, requests and complaints shared with staff in an ad-hoc manner during daily interactions in the field or in the office.	Document feedback using the IRC Feedback Logbook.	**Record what you hear from clients**. When you are working with clients, write down the feedback, requests and complaints share with you, even when it may initially seem irrelevant or trivial. **Don't be afraid to share negative feedback.** It is not easy to share negative feedback with your colleagues or partners. But learning from mistakes is essential to avoid repeating them. Think about how to share negative feedback in a constructive way. Documenting such feedback helps to track issues that arise and their frequency. For more information refer to the Handling Negative Feedback Guidance.
Feedback collected through Reactive Feedback Channels	Feedback, requests and complaints shared through suggestion boxes, hotlines, SMS, feedback desks, etc.	Document feedback using the IRC Feedback Registry.	**Record systematically all** feedback, requests and, complaints received. Ensure staff members responsible for entering data into the feedback registry have been trained on how to do this. **Ensure confidentiality** of feedback, requests and complaints received. **Ensure specific measures and protocols are in place to report and respond to allegations of abuse & exploitation, including SEA and other sensitive complaints.** See Safety and Ethical Considerations for Sensitive Complaints and the IRC Guidelines for a Survivor-Centered Approach to Reporting Safeguarding Misconduct.
Feedback collected through Proactive Feedback Channels	Clients' perspectives and feedback collected by IRC teams through surveys, focus group discussions, community meetings, individual interviews, etc.	Use the Guidance Writing Questions to Proactively Collect Client Feedback, to design your questionnaire.	**Disaggregate your data by** age, sex and other relevant categories (geographic region, nationality, religion, etc.) to achieve a more nuanced understanding of our client's perspectives. If possible, use available software to **conduct surveys and collect responses through mobile phones and tablet** to ease data collection and analysis

1.2. Presenting and Referring Client Feedback, Complaints and Other Information

Information received from clients through reactive channels will not be limited to the feedback solicited and may also include other complaints (request for information, programmatic complaints, allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse), as well as other information, requests or questions.

Because the IRC functions as a team, feedback often needs to be passed on, or “referred”, to other persons (colleagues, peers, supervisors, leadership, third parties, etc.) who are in the position to analyze and take decisions based on that feedback. A referral implies that the responsibility to act upon the feedback and Close the Loop with the client(s) is transferred to another person or organization.

Whenever possible, it is advisable to let the clients know that you are referring their case by informing them:

- Which organization or department their feedback has been referred to;
- The contact details of their new point of contact ;
- That their personal details will not be shared without their consent; and
- That this matter will be treated with confidentiality

The table below defines the referral pathways for the seven (7) different categories of feedback and requests we receive from our clients:

	Type of category	Priority level	Explanation	Record	Respond	Refer
1	Request for information	Low or medium	An information request about the type of aid and services available at the IRC, the location or timing of a specific service, questions about targeting or registration criteria, eligibility criteria, etc.	**Yes** Record into the Feedback Registry.	**Yes** if you know the answer	If you don’t know the answer, refer to the protection actor responsible for information services.
2	Request for assistance	Medium or High	Request to be included in one of the IRC aid or service provision programs.	**Yes** Record into the Feedback Registry.	**Yes** if you know the answer	If you don’t know the answer, refer to the Protection team or relevant program staff members, and/or discuss during weekly meetings, if request is not sensitive/ confidential.
3	Programmatic complaint – minor dissatisfaction	Medium	Complaint about aid entitlement missing or delayed, the timing or location of IRC services, or timelines of IRC staff and partners.	**Yes** Record into the Feedback Registry.	**Yes** if you know the answer	Record into the Feedback Registry. If you don’t know how to respond, refer to relevant program staff member or discuss during weekly staff meeting.
4	Programmatic complaint – major dissatisfaction	High	Complaint about staff attitude, lack of access to aid distribution or service, lack of access to information, exclusion of a minority/vulnerable group, extortion of aid by	**Yes** Record into the Feedback Registry.	**No**	Refer to the supervisor or program manager, HR or field coordinator for interpretation and action.

			a third party (with no IRC involvement), refusal by IRC staff to listen or acknowledge a complaint or inability for a client to reach the feedback hotline or any other mechanism.			
5	Breach of the IRC Way, IRC policy, procedure, or the law, safeguarding misconduct[1]	Critical	Allegations of the following involving **IRC staff and partners,** including: • Exploitation and abuse (sexual, economic, other) • Gender Based Violence (GBV) • Bribery, corruption and kickbacks • Child protection • Fraud • (Sexual) Harassment or discrimination • Misappropriation or misuse of IRC resources/assets • Physical safety risks • Procurement fraud • Retaliation • Threat	Don't record any personal information or details in Feedback Registry, but take detailed notes for referring or reporting the matter.	**No** Don't try to investigate or handle the complaint	Refer the person to the appropriate support services (WPE, Child Protection or PRoL depending on the content of the allegations) **Report immediately to the ECU** following the existing procedures and IRC Guidelines for a Survivor-Centered Approach to Reporting Safeguarding Misconduct. Use two primary channels outlined in the IRC Way[2] using: • IRC's Ethics Hotline (Ethics Point): irc.ethicspoint.com • Ethics and Compliance Unit (ECU) confidential mailbox: integrity@rescue.org Refer to Annex 3 of the Guidance to Present, Interpret and Respond to Client Feedback for additional Guidance on Reporting to the ECU ***If in doubt, report to the ECU for guidance.**
6	Allegations of abuse or exploitation against non IRC staff or representative	Critical	Allegations of child abuse, sexual exploitation and abuse, theft or fraud committed by someone who is **not an IRC staff, or partner** (e.g. other members of the community, armed groups, officials, other organizations, etc.).	Don't record any personal information or details in the Feedback Registry, but take detailed notes for later referring or	**No** Don't try to investigate or handle the complaint.	Refer immediately to PRoL, Child Protection, WPE or any other relevant program manager depending on the content of the allegations. Refer to the Safety and Ethical Considerations for Sensitive Complaints If the allegation relates to a member of another aid organization, **report to the ECU**

[1] The IRC requires mandatory reporting for alleged safeguarding misconduct involving children (defined as any person under the age of 18 years), but does not take the same reporting position for alleged misconduct against adults. It is requested that alleged misconduct against adults be reported, however it is not mandatory. Refer to the IRC Guidelines for a Survivor-Centered Approach to Reporting Safeguarding Misconduct for more details.
[2] The IRC Way: Standards for Professional Conduct: https://rescuenet.rescue.org/Interact/Pages/Content/Document.aspx?id=7766&SearchId=142948

				reporting the matter		.
7	General feedback/ other	Low	Opinions, comments, ideas, suggestions, expectations and spams.	**Yes** Record into the [Feedback Registry.]	Acknowledge and respond if need be.	Refer (the person or the feedback) to other relevant organizations if the feedback was meant for them or if this is a request that would fall within their mandate.

2. Interpreting Client Feedback and Making Decisions

Once client feedback, requests and complaints have been documented, referred and presented to the relevant staff members and units (see above), it needs to be interpreted to inform our programmatic and strategic decisions. The information below provides advice on how to interpret and make decisions based on the information received from our clients.

2.1 General Approach

Identify major trends and outliers: Look at the feedback you have received over the past week, month, or quarter. Try to identify the major trends. What are people most concerned about? What are they most confused about? What do they want to see happen? Then identify the outliers: feedback that is contrary to what the broader group is saying, or cases in which certain clients are talking about topics that no one else is bringing up.

Try to understand what is behind the trends: Based on what you know about your clients, try to explain the trends you see in the data. Is a group of clients concerned about a specific issue? If so, what particular experiences may have informed this perspective? What might be unique about the outliers that would lead them to different concerns or opinions from other clients?

Triangulate: Where possible, bring in other sources of information to help you make sense of what you are seeing in the feedback data. Are there other reports, records, or resources that might help you understand these trends? Can other sources of information describe and/or validate the concerns you are hearing through client feedback?

Weigh your options: Try to outline the possible courses of action for addressing the various concerns and ideas raised through the feedback channels. Evaluate how feasible it would be to implement those actions based on your program's mandate and resources (technical, human, financial). Assess whether you can meet the expressed expectations of all the clients that you have heard feedback from, or whether there needs to be trade-offs. If you decide there will need to be trade-offs (that is, you cannot meet everyone's requests), consider your operating environment and the IRC's strategic objectives when prioritizing. Recognize when certain concerns require immediate reporting the ECU and file a report using the available channels as noted above.

Decide a course of action: Based on your analysis of the trends, the options you've generated, and the opportunities and constraints you've identified, your team needs to make a decision. This decision could be made in consultation with a group of clients (such as a Stakeholder Reference Group – a small group of clients representing the interests of your target group) or internally with other IRC team members. And, of course, don't forget to "Close the Loop" by informing your clients about the decision and creating room for discussion. Advice on how to effectively Close the Loop is provided in Section 4 below.

2.2 Interpreting Contradictions and Differences

2.2.1 Interpreting Feedback and Making Decisions about how to Respond: When there are Contradictions or Major Differences in Clients' Feedback

Why might we be hearing client feedback that contradicts other client feedback?

People have different experiences with our services: We rarely have the resources to address all the diverse needs of our clients, and therefore we need to make prioritizations and trade-offs that will likely satisfy some groups/individuals and not others. This may lead us to hear positive feedback from the group that was served, and negative feedback from the group that feels left out.

People are entitled to different opinions: Any group of reasonable people can disagree about the best course of action for dealing with a complex emergency. The IRC's course of action may be shaped by evidence on best practice, donor constraints, and our resources; our clients may have different ideas based on their unique experiences, needs, and perspectives. Therefore, even a highly participatory process may not generate consensus about the most appropriate approach.

How to make sense of those contradictions?

Try to understand who this feedback is coming from. Is this gender or age specific? Try to analyze what might have led our clients to give us that feedback.

Ask your IRC colleagues: Field staff, who may be from these communities or have developed an understanding of the local context from extensive work with these communities, might have different experiences that can help you make sense of the feedback.

Ask your clients: You can have a meeting with your clients (through, for example, a Client Advisory Group) where you ask them to help you make sense of the different opinions you are hearing. No one is better suited to explain the complexity of a community than the people who live in it. However, be particularly careful with this option when dealing with feedback that is sensitive or may put groups of clients at risk.

Consult other people who have knowledge of the community: Aid workers, academics, journalists, local government workers or others, may be able to help. A point of caution: be aware of their biases based on their relationship to your clients and be careful not to disclose information that could violate the confidentiality.

Triangulate client feedback data with other data and information: Additionally, you can consult other data sources. Look at reports from other program teams, M&E data, information from the IRC hotline (if one exists), distribution logs, etc. You may find some information that helps you understand the contradictions you are seeing.

2.2.2 Interpreting Feedback and Making Decisions about How to Respond: When the Feedback Contradicts Other Data / Information

Why might client feedback contradict other sources of information?

Communities change over time: Communities are constantly evolving and changing, as are their needs, priorities, and experiences. An assessment done a month ago may show that people were concerned about shelter, but since then the dry season has begun and people are more concerned about access to drinking water. Therefore, data collected at different times may be reflecting changes on the ground.

Different data reflect different aspects of the truth: Often, client feedback may not be contradicting existing data, but rather providing more insight and nuance. An M&E report may count the number of participants in a malaria seminar, but based on client feedback, field staff may realize that people didn't understand the key messages and were confused. This isn't contradictory information; it's complementary information.

People may tell different information to different people: Who is collecting information, and under what circumstances, may affect what information people provide. If a survey was done by foreigners and a call center is being run by locals, clients may tell the foreigners what they think they want to hear or what might get them more assistance. People may be more honest with their fellow citizens, or conversely more willing to admit something they deem "shameful" to a foreigner they will never see again.

People may not tell the truth: Clients are not obliged to tell us the truth. They may withhold information or tell us what they think we want to hear, which will inevitably contradict more objective sources of information (like school attendance records).

How to make sense of those contradictions?

Understand who has collected what data and under what circumstances: Might those who have collected the data hold certain biases? Do they have an incentive to produce a report with certain findings? Would our clients be comfortable telling these people the truth?

Weigh the objectivity of each data source: You need to assess how objective, complete, and valid your different sources of information are. A school attendance record is more objective than self-reported attendance. On the other hand, objective and complete information (like attendance records) may not capture more important, subjective information (like behavior changes or learnings). Certain information may be very objective and valid for a small group (i.e. clinic records), but not reflect the overall population (because not everyone goes to the clinic). All of this needs to be balanced when making sense of contradictory information sources.

Make sure you aren't comparing apples to oranges: You need to truly understand what your different sources are measuring or reporting. You may have an M&E report that tells you that adequate food was delivered to every household, and client feedback that the food delivery wasn't satisfactory. This may not be a contradiction: the M&E report is telling you about the *quantity* of food, while the client feedback is telling you about the *quality* of food. Your information sources may be comparing two very different time periods (rainy season versus dry season) or two different groups of people (literate women who could use a letter box to write complaints versus women of all literacy levels who participated in a focus group). Your information sources may not be as contradictory as you think.

Ask around and triangulate: Other people within the IRC or in the community may be able to help you make sense of the contradictions. You may want to talk to those responsible for collecting the contradictory data that you feel is contradictory. Again, this must be done in a way that is respectful of the confidentiality of client feedback and does not risk putting any group at increased risk of harm.

3. Explain and Discuss

3.1 What is "Closing the Loop"?

"Closing the loop" refers to communicating to clients what has been done in response to their feedback. When clients provide feedback, we need to explain and discuss with them how their feedback was taken into account, what we were able to do (or not), and the rationale behind this decision.

3.2 Why do we Close the Loop?

If we don't "Close the Loop", the feedback process falls apart. Experience and research has shown that if clients do not know what has become of their feedback, if it disappears into an organizational "black box", then they will lose trust in the feedback process and stop using it. The following section highlights some of the reasons why closing the loop is so essential to a healthy, functioning feedback mechanism.

Closing the Loop shows that we are listening*:* In day-to-day conversations, we expect people to acknowledge what we are telling them as a sign that they are actively listening to us. Responding to client feedback is, at a minimum, an acknowledgement that the organization is actively listening.

Closing the Loop is a sign of respect: Clients expend their time and energy to provide us feedback, and it would be disrespectful not to take the time and energy to respond to them. The best way to demonstrate that we value their participation and communication is with timely and respectful responses.

Closing the Loop builds trust: By routinely communicating how feedback has informed our decisions and providing an opportunity to discuss these decisions and actions, we promote trust in the IRC. With increased trust, clients will be more likely to use feedback mechanisms and provide us with important information which will inform effective programming decisions.

Closing the loop promotes dialogue and transparency*:* When we listen, respond and communicate how we are using feedback, it gives communities a better sense of how the IRC works. This can help manage expectations of what we can and cannot do. It's a form of dialogue: we explain our decisions and actions in response to feedback, this provides the opportunity for clients to ask further questions and feedback, to which we respond then or at later point. This is part of our commitment to Client Responsiveness.

3.3 Why do we find it hard to Close the Loop at times?

We may lack information: We may find it hard to Close the Loop with our clients when we do not have sufficient information. We should accept the fact that we cannot have a perfect answer to everything an affected community asks and be honest when we cannot find an answer to their question.

We cannot act on the client's request: Client requests can be about issues beyond IRC control. We may not have the mandate, the capacity, or the resources to act on the information. The humanitarian system can be confusing; our clients may not understand the political, operational, and financial constraints of the IRC, and may request changes that are unrealistic. We should be honest about the limits of our organization.

The client request goes against IRC principles and ethics: Sometimes, clients may request information that we are not allowed to give because of confidentiality or ethical reasons. For example, a community may request a list of names of people who visited an HIV clinic, but it would be inappropriate to share this confidential information. We should communicate in a clear, but sensitive, way about the principles to which the IRC adheres.

Case studies have shown that crisis-affected communities prefer an honest response, even if unsatisfactory, to no response at all.[3] Clients need up-to-date information to make important decisions about their lives and livelihoods. More information about how to communicate potentially unsatisfactory or disappointing feedback is presented in the Guidelines for Handling Negative Feedback & Difficult Conversations.

3.4 Practical Guidance on Closing the Loop

Action	Description and rationale	Tips and advice
Ask your clients how we should Close the Loop	Empowering clients to tell us how they want to hear from us will increase the likelihood that the channels will be used in the first place.	Include questions about preferred responses channels into your client surveys, community meetings, etc. See Writing Questions to Proactively Collect Client Feedback Ask different groups of clients to consider different responses channels appropriate to them (e.g. women, minorities, etc.) Note that it may be appropriate to select a different channel to Close the Loop through, other than the one you received the feedback from in the first place (e.g. you may collect feedback in a focus group discussion, but Close the Loop via direct SMS).
Select the appropriate response channels	Select the appropriate channel to provide a response to the client. Different channels will be appropriate depending on the type of feedback, requests or complaints received (from an individual or group, sensitive or not) and on your operational environment (access, resources and skills available, literacy levels and languages spoken).	Select multiple channels to respond to different types of feedback, requests and complaints and to different clients. Use the table in Annex 1 to select your response channels. Consider costs and other available resources. For more information about the relative advantages and disadvantages of the various channels, use the table in Annex 2 "Strengths and Weaknesses of the Different Channels and Contextual/Operational Considerations".
Identify / set the timing of the response	Define, in consultation with staff and your clients, the maximum number of days that the IRC should take to provide a response to clients.	This time response should not exceed 15 days. Set up faster response time for sensitive and / or urgent complaints (see Table 1 in Section 1.2 above). If providing a complete response requires more time, acknowledge receipt of the feedback, request or complaint and provide regular updates to the client.
Plan and allocate resources to respond to client feedback	At project design and/or start-up, develop plans and budgets for the staff to respond to client feedback.	Plan and budget for the human resources, travel, field activities, material and communication costs required to respond to client feedback. For more detailed guidance, see A Quick Guide for IRC Proposal Writing. Integrate relevant actions and activities required into staff and program work plans.
Record and keep track	Information received by any type of feedback channels should be recorded into a feedback registry. It helps to process and track feedback and to ensure that the loop has been closed.	Record using the Feedback Registry. Develop specific protocols to define roles and responsibilities for recording and accessing information in the Feedback Registry.

[3] Cechvala, Sarah, 2016. `For them, with them.' Building Accountability Systems in Post-Earthquake Nepal'. CDA-World Vision International Nepal Feedback Loops Case Study. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, January 2016.

Monitor and review	Regularly monitor and review the performance of your feedback mechanisms to provide responses to client feedback.	Monitor and review the number of responses provided, out of the numbers of feedback received. Monitor and review the timeliness of the responses provided. Ask clients for their perspectives on the channels, content, and timeliness of the response provided. See specific indicators proposed in A Quick Guide for IRC Proposal Writing. Document and analyze monitoring data to improve the quality and timeliness of the responses provided to client feedback.