GUIDANCE ON CLIENT-RESPONSIVE PROJECT DESIGN

APRIL 2018

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The authors would like to give special mention to the following people for reviewing and providing invaluable feedback on the draft guidance (in alphabetical order): Benson Maina, Co-Chair of the Quality and Accountability Inter-Agency Working Group for East and Central Africa, Christian Bühler at Diakonie- Katastrophenhilfe, Eva Erlach and her colleagues at Ground Truth Solutions, Isabella Jean at CDA Collaborative Learning and Lotte Ruppert at the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

We would also like to once again thank the 120 staff from across agencies and contexts for participating in the research which informed this guidance. The research report, ***Designing for a Change in Perspective: Embracing Client Perspectives in Humanitarian Project Design***, can be found on the IRC's website.

Finally, this work could not have been possible without the generous support of the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) who have provided funding for the Designing for a Change in Perspective project implemented by the IRC over the period May 2017 – April 2018.

Cover Photo: Christian Bastiansen / IRC
Designed by Shirley Rodriguez.

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1. CLIENT-RESPONSIVE PROJECT DESIGN

Photo: Ton Koene / SV

PROGRAMMING IS CLIENT-RESPONSIVE WHEN WE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT IN A WAY THAT TAKES INTO ACCOUNT THE VIEWS OF OUR CLIENTS.[1]

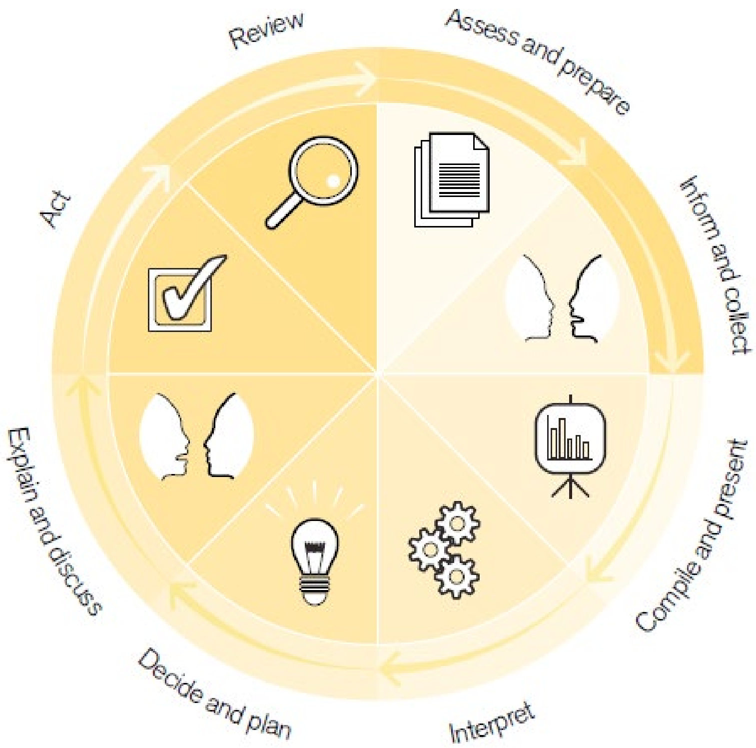
Photo: Tim Jenner / IRC

Client-responsive programming implies that the humanitarian organisation systematically and deliberately collects and uses the feedback of its clients to inform programmatic decision making. For many teams, such as those with limited resources, low capacity and challenging operational contexts, client-responsive design will simply imply consultation: they will ask their clients for their feedback and then they will make design decisions informed by that feedback. For some teams, such as those who have been implementing their programming with a client-responsive lens for longer, who have developed capacity across their team to implement the feedback cycle, and / or who have a more established relationship with their clients, client-responsive design may mean deeper engagement of their clients, where clients actively participate in the implementation of the feedback cycle and the design process.[2]

The IRC's Approach to Client-Responsive Programming involves the systematic and deliberate implementation of 8 Actions, forming an effective feedback cycle. These 8 Actions are implemented at each key stage of the programme cycle – at design, start-up, implementation and then at close-out. Our guidance and standards of practice are nuanced for each of these specific programming phases, and are intended to be adapted by humanitarian teams according to their specific geographical and operating context.

The 8 Actions of our feedback cycle reflect the key steps highlighted as best practice in feedback loops elsewhere.[3] The key difference is that the IRC's feedback cycle places greater emphasis on the actions associated with using feedback, as our experience and research has shown us that this tends to be the weakest point of the feedback cycle. The extra attention and guidance which is paid to the use of feedback, through breaking usage into multiple stages (or Actions), may help other humanitarian actors to work through any blockages that they are currently facing in this crucial step.

THE FEEDBACK CYCLE



The IRC's feedback cycle entails:

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 and how they will be informed of the results;
3. Compiling and presenting the feedback data which has been collected;
4. Interpreting the feedback data;
5. Deciding and planning what actions and decisions to take in response to the feedback;
6. Explaining and discussing the feedback findings and respective decisions with our clients;
7. Acting upon those decisions; and,
8. Reviewing and monitoring progress and impact of the action upon clients.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF CLIENT-RESPONSIVE PROJECT DESIGN?

Client-responsive programming as an approach has a number of important benefits. There is growing evidence[4] that placing people affected by crisis at the centre of our decisions about humanitarian aid design and delivery will make our assistance more:

EFFECTIVE
Successful in achieving the results and changes 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; and,

ACCOUNTABLE
Responsible towards our clients, affected communities and other key stakeholders for the decisions and actions we take.

Client-responsive programming also contributes 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 identify, deter and manage risks of fraud, corruption and any other illegal or inappropriate behaviours from our own staff or partners, and it can help ensure secure access for our staff to the people who communities in unstable contexts;

Empowerment of clients: Involving clients in the design of the projects enables them to play a part in improving their situation and can contribute to services being provided in ways that enable them to live without aid in the future;

Fairness of services and programmes: Client-responsive programming promotes awareness of differences between our clients and specific vulnerabilities; and

Awareness of services: Involving clients in programme decision making contributes to increased awareness of the objectives of a future project and enables us to manage expectations at an early stage.

Engaging with affected communities and intended clients during the design phase of a humanitarian project maximises their opportunity to have an influence over our programming decisions.

With client-responsive project design, humanitarian organisations seek out and use clients' perspectives to inform their design decisions, asking clients about their priority needs, their aspirations for how they would like their lives to improve, and what preferences they have for the type of aid and services that they would like to receive. This engagement can also help agencies to understand how clients would want to engage and participate in the project delivery.

WHAT ARE THE COMMON CHALLENGES FACED BY HUMANITARIAN PRACTITIONERS?

The project design phase is the point of the programme cycle at which clients are typically least consulted: it is often the point when humanitarian staff face the greatest constraints in their time and budgets, and where their decisions are required to be informed by multiple, and often competing, priorities and sources of information.

The most common challenges highlighted through our research are:

- Limited time (resulting from short funding windows combined with the imperative to meet existing needs);
- Lack of human or financial resources;
- Limited access to clients;
- Lack of trust and solid relationships;
- Feedback fatigue amongst target populations;
- A concern about raising expectations;
- Lack of capacity to analyse feedback data;
- Lack of flexibility from donors to adjust their priorities; and,
- Lack of cooperation between humanitarian actors.

These factors – whether perceived or actual – have resulted in aid agencies using client feedback to inform their project designs far less than many of them would aspire to.

Further information on each of these challenges can be read in the accompanying research report, [Designing for a Change in Perspective: Embracing Client Perspectives in Humanitarian Project Design.]

2. OVERVIEW OF THE GUIDANCE

Photo: Peter Biro / IRC

PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDANCE

The purpose of this Guidance is to aid the staff of humanitarian organisations who are engaged in project design and proposal development to design their projects in a client-responsive manner. The Guidance facilitates this process by providing detailed practical advice on how to implement a series of 8 Actions, constituting a feedback cycle, and tips how to overcome common challenges. This Guidance also provides recommendations to humanitarian leadership and donors as to how they can enable and incentivise client-responsive project design.

BACKGROUND

The Guidance is informed by research that the IRC conducted over the period August – November 2017 into the current participatory project design practices of aid agencies, and the common challenges or barriers that they faced in designing projects in a client-responsive manner. The guidance and tips on overcoming the challenges were drafted by the IRC with additional contributions provided by a group of accountability specialists from across the humanitarian sector. Stemming from these and other discussions, the IRC drafted the recommendations to humanitarian leadership and donors.

The research and this Guidance have been produced as part of the project, Designing for a Change in Perspective, funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida). Sida has committed to “Increased influence for people affected by crises”[5] in its 2017-2020 strategy, and is supporting IRC’s contribution to more responsive and accountable programming within the IRC and across the sector.

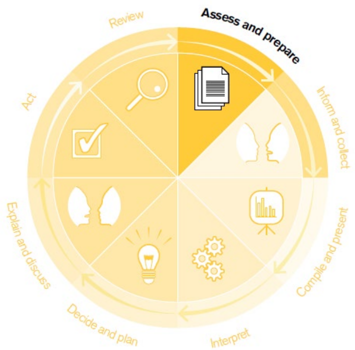
The IRC has likewise prioritised Responsiveness as one of its six organisational objectives under its 2020 strategy. The present project is implemented as part of a body of IRC work intending to drive and deliver client-responsive programming within the organisation and across the sector.

3. CLIENT-RESPONSIVE DESIGN: QUICK GLANCE

This section serves as a quick reference for humanitarian practitioners of the steps involved in each Action of the feedback loop in a client-responsive project design process.

Photo: Peter Biro / IRC

CLIENT RESPONSIVE DESIGN: A QUICK GLANCE



Action 1: Assess and Prepare

Identify the scope within which you have to be client-responsive in your project design

Identify your intended clients (the people who your project will serve)

Identify your information needs: what feedback data you need to inform your project design

Identify how you will obtain the feedback you need: which feedback channels you will use

Prepare a workplan and develop the materials that you will use to administer the feedback cycle

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Action 2: Inform and Collect

Brief the team that will be collecting the feedback

Inform the clients about the purpose of collecting their feedback

Ask clients for their feedback

Action 3: Compile and Present

Collate and compile the feedback data

Disaggregate your data, and run some simple statistical analyses

Identify key themes and issues

Present the feedback data in a way which is accessible and can be effectively interpreted

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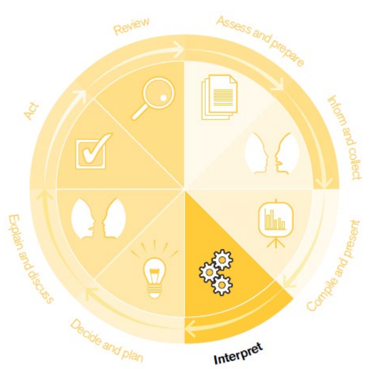

Action 4: Interpret

Present suggested interpretations and options

Discuss what is behind the feedback

Compare and contrast the feedback data with other information sources

Dig deeper into the findings through discussions with key informants or focus groups

Consider involving client representatives in the interpretation of your feedback data

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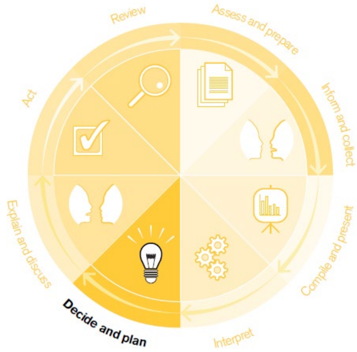

Action 5: Decide and Plan

Make a decision about who you will target, to address which need and with which intervention

Document your decisions

Consider involving client representatives in design decision making

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Action 6: Explain and Discuss

Explain to your intended clients the feedback you heard from them

Explain to your clients how you analysed and took decisions about how to respond to the feedback

Inform your clients about the decision you have taken and the rationale behind this

Open up the conversation for questions and further discussion

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Action 7: Act

Reflect your design decisions in the your logframe, workplan and M&E plan

Build into your design, proposal and budget plans for ensuring that your implementation is client-responsive

Record or refer feedback that has not been addressed in your design

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Action 8: Review

Identify what went well about the process

Identify what didn't go so well about the process

Share your learning amongst your team, with other teams in your organisation / country programme, and with other organisations

Consider involving your clients in the review of the feedback mechanism

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

This section provides a summary of our recommendations for humanitarian leadership and donors as to how they can enable and incentivise client-responsive project design.

Photo: Sasha Pippenger / IRC

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

- Communicate through words and actions that client-responsiveness is as important as fundraising
- Promote client-responsiveness through modelling responsive behaviour in interactions with staff
- Allocate unrestricted resources to teams to invest in client-responsive project design
- Simplify proposal review processes to allow for more client consultation and engagement during project design

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS

- Clearly communicate in calls for proposals that alternative intervention strategies based on client feedback are welcome
- Extend the time for proposal development where contextually appropriate to allow for more client consultation and engagement during design
- Include client-responsiveness as an essential funding criterion in calls for proposals
- Provide and encourage applicants to allocate resources to client-responsiveness
- Require applicants to plan for an inception phase in which to update and further develop the design based on client feedback and other contextual changes
- Permit applicants to include a contingency line in their budget and allow for maximum flexibility between budget categories to adapt the project based on client feedback

For your referenace, print and keep.

5. CLIENT-RESPONSIVE DESIGN: DETAILED GUIDANCE

This section provides more detailed guidance for humanitarian practitioners about how to implement the 8 Actions of an effective feedback loop in a client-responsive project design process. We also provide advice on how to simply tackle the common challenges involved in implementing these Actions during the design process.

Photo: Tommy Trenchard / Panos / IRC

ACTION 1:
ASSESS AND PREPARE

This Action involves you identifying the objectives and scope of the feedback cycle during your upcoming project design process (what feedback do you intend to collect, from whom and how); planning and informing your team about its timeframe, staffing and budget; and preparing the materials and systems that you will use to collect, analyse and act upon your intended clients' feedback.

IDENTIFY THE SCOPE WITHIN WHICH YOU HAVE TO BE CLIENT-RESPONSIVE IN YOUR PROJECT DESIGN.

Firstly, consider what scope you have to make this particular project client-responsive. This will be influenced by the time and resources you have available, and the degree of control you have over decision making related to the design and the design process. Once you know this, you will be better able to plan your feedback cycle. We have given illustrations of the implication of differences in scope for each of these three areas. You can think through these questions independently in a couple of minutes (if you have limited time), or discuss them together as a team (in an ideal scenario).

TIME: What time do we have? For example, how much time do we have until the proposal is due to the donor, or to other colleagues (technical or management) for review and sign off?

- If you have less time, you may want to focus on using feedback data that you already have to inform your design. Consider reviewing recently completed evaluations for similar programs implemented in the target area.

- If you have more time, you will be able to collect additional feedback from your intended client. We also recommend agencies consider involving their clients and partners directly in the design process (for example through a Client Advisory Group).

RESOURCES: What resources do we have? Do we have any unrestricted financial resources we can put to this process? What can we do for free? Do any of the team members, or other colleagues, such as those in the M&E team, partners or volunteers, have time to support the process?

- If you have fewer resources, you may want to use feedback channels which do not require extensive travel costs and / or staff time, or you may want to integrate questions intended to inform client-responsiveness into an existing project activity or monitoring exercise.

- If you have greater resources, you will be able to collect feedback from a wider sample of your intended clients, helping you to better understand nuances in perspective between different client groups. You will also be in a position to triangulate your feedback data by using several, complementary feedback channels.

CONTROL: How much freedom do we have to influence the shape of the project design? What is required of us by the donor? Would they consider a well-justified and evidenced alternative proposal to that which they're outlining in the call for proposals? What is required of us by our organisation? For example, do our projects also need to be informed by other information sources or analyses? Can we manage to meet those commitments, whilst also being client responsive?

- If you have limited control over your design decisions, you may focus on collecting client perspectives on how to implement the project and how clients would like to be engaged in informing project delivery and adaptations throughout.
- If you have a greater degree of influence over your design decisions, you will be able to ask your intended clients for their feedback on what the objectives of the project should be and who it should serve (as well as their perspectives on how it should be delivered and how they would want to be engaged during the project implementation).

IDENTIFY YOUR INTENDED CLIENTS (THE PEOPLE WHO YOUR PROJECT WILL SERVE)

This may seem like an obvious question, but it will be likely that there will be discernible differences between your intended clients. These may be differences in gender, age, disability, ethnicity, language, education levels, employment status, and many other factors. These differences will likely result in your clients having different experiences and perspectives which you will want to reflect in your project design in order to ensure that it best meets the different needs of your target group. Of course, even within these categories individuals will also have differing perspectives (and their perspectives may change over time!). By identifying these differences you will be better able to decide whose feedback you need, and how best to collect it.

Beyond your intended clients there may also be other people in the community whose perspectives you need to understand in order to inform the project. For example, it may be important to understand the perspectives of male relatives of women you intend to target with a sexual and reproductive health project, to mitigate any risks of them preventing women from accessing the proposed services. You may also see that you need to collect the perspectives of community leaders / elders in the first instance, so that they feel you have respected the cultural norms in their community, before you proceed to collecting feedback from those people your project intends to directly serve.

IDENTIFY YOUR INFORMATION NEEDS: WHAT FEEDBACK DATA YOU NEED TO INFORM YOUR PROJECT DESIGN

Once you know who you want to collect feedback from, your next decision will be what feedback you need. For most projects, you would want to know the following from your clients: (a) What do they consider to be their priority needs? (b) What aspirations do they have about what they would like to see improve in relation to those priority needs? (c) How would they best like those needs to be addressed, that is, what kinds of services or aid delivery mechanisms (in-kind, cash) would they prefer?

However, in many cases you will not need to collect feedback on each of these areas. Such cases include scenarios in which:

- Your scope to influence the overall objectives of the project is limited. For example, because a donor call for proposal limits you to projects aiming to improve sexual and reproductive health of women in certain target communities, then you would need to focus on obtaining feedback about your intended clients' preferred project methodology and the type of sexual and reproductive health services they would like to receive.

- You already have relevant, up-to-date, reliable feedback data which addresses one or more of these questions. For example, you have been working with a community covered by the call for proposals for a long period of time and you have collected their feedback on all three questions as part of your monitoring and evaluation of a current project which is soon to come to a close. In that case, you may decide to rely solely on that existing data. Another example you may encounter is that a peer organisation has recently conducted a comprehensive survey of your intended client group and captured information on their priority needs and their aspirations for the improvements that they would like to see in that area, but they didn't collect feedback on the type of services that the client group would like to receive. In this case, you may decide that you need to obtain information just on preferred services / delivery methodology.

By focusing on these questions, you can ensure that the information that you collect is precisely what you need to inform your design – no more and no less.

Photo: Susana Ferreira / IRC

IDENTIFY HOW YOU WILL OBTAIN THE FEEDBACK YOU NEED: WHICH FEEDBACK CHANNELS YOU WILL USE

Once you have identified which information you need, your next decision will be whether to (a) find and use existing feedback data (which your organisation has previously collected, or that which has been collected by other actors), or (b) collect new feedback data. You may also use a combination of the two approaches.

Your default option is (a) use existing feedback data. The following questions will help you to assess whether this data is adequate for your requirements:

- **RELIABLE:** do the data come from a source which you can trust?
- **UP-TO-DATE:** are the data recent enough to still be relevant to your project?
- **COMPREHENSIVE:** do the data address all of your information requirements?
- **REPRESENTATIVE:** are the data disaggregated by the categories of clients relevant to your project (e.g. gender, age and ethnicity)?

If you decide that existing feedback data is not adequate in one or more of these areas, then you will want to decide how to proactively collect new and / or additional feedback data. The main proactive feedback channels you can use are: surveys, focus group discussions, individual interviews, community meetings, local radio and stakeholder reference groups. Each methodology has different benefits, drawbacks and requires differing levels of resources, time and capacity. Depending on your information needs, time, capacity and resources, you may decide to collect feedback through multiple channels: this can help validate your data and provide different types of information (e.g. quantitative as well as qualitative data).

Once you have identified the channel(s) that you will use, you will then make a plan for who will administer them (for example, programme staff, monitoring and evaluation staff, client representatives, community volunteers, an independent data collection agency, or a combination thereof). Your decision about whether to involve members of the intended client group or community targeted by the proposed project will be influenced by your decision about whether you will focus on client consultation or whether you want to take a more participatory approach to the delivery of your programming.

PREPARE A WORKPLAN AND DEVELOP THE MATERIALS THAT YOU WILL USE TO ADMINISTER THE FEEDBACK CYCLE

Once you have answered these questions, you would then prepare a workplan for yourselves identifying the which channels you will use, who would be responsible for implementing them, when, whether any financial resources are involved, and whether any advanced training / briefing of those who will administer the channel(s) is needed.

You would then also develop the supporting materials that you will use to collect the feedback, such as survey questions.

TIPS ON OVERCOMING COMMON CHALLENGES

YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE TO START

Use this Guidance! It has been designed to help you think through what you need to do: the three questions above – who your intended clients are, what feedback you want to ask them for, and how will you collect their feedback – will give you a good starting point.

YOU DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME TO PLAN OUT HOW TO MAKE THE PROJECT CLIENT-RESPONSIVE

With the right tools at your disposal, one person with decent knowledge of the context and with sufficient authority to make decisions could independently work through the questions outlined above and prepare a plan which outlines the feedback channels that you will use and the associated timeframe and roles and responsibilities in under two hours. We recommend that this is done as part of the broader process of project design (often equated with proposal development) planning, as you can (and ideally will) integrate the feedback cycle into other project assessment and decision making processes.

YOU DON'T KNOW WHO YOUR INTENDED CLIENTS WILL BE

If this is the case, then you might consider collecting feedback on a range of themes from a sample of people across the community you intend to work in, to see where the greatest needs are and what you're best placed as an organisation to address. You can then better identify your intended client group, and if time permits, follow-up with them to ask for some more detailed feedback to inform your project design. Don't forget to communicate with other agencies (bilaterally or through the cluster system or inter-agency meetings, to identify unserved / under-served groups).

YOU DON'T HAVE THE SKILLS OR EXPERIENCE WITHIN THE TEAM TO EFFECTIVELY COLLECT FEEDBACK

As with limited resources, there are a number of ways you can manage the challenge of limited team capacity:

- There are many good online resources which can guide you in implementing different feedback channels / methodologies, which you can use with little or no advance training.[6] It may be difficult for you to make the time to fully address a lack of capacity in the middle of a design process, but if this is a challenge that you come across often, you may consider making time for key staff to take some of the free online courses on Accountability to Affected Populations[7] and feedback collection methodologies, to build the capacity of your team for future design processes.
- You can adapt existing high-quality surveys or other data collection materials for use in your own programme; and should remember that materials can always be updated based on learning and experience.
- If you have financial but not human resources, you can consider contracting external organisations specialised in perception surveys with affected people to provide guidance and implement a feedback mechanism for your organisation.

YOU DON'T HAVE MANY RESOURCES WITH WHICH TO COLLECT FEEDBACK

There are a number of ways you can address this common challenge. The following provides suggestions for key ways in which you can work with limited resources whilst still designing your project in a client-responsive manner.

- If you have some resources but not many, then thinking through the three key questions (above) can help you to identify what your priority information needs are and thus where to invest those limited resources.
- Use low cost feedback channels: feedback can be collected in many forms and interacting with clients and potential clients through social media such as Facebook or Whatsapp can be an option in certain contexts if resources are scarce.
- Use feedback data that you already have: you can prepare yourselves to have relevant feedback data available for a forthcoming project designs by building feedback collection into the implementation of your existing projects. We recommend that you ask for feedback on your clients' preferences, aspirations and expectations for a future project, alongside existing project monitoring and assessment exercises (e.g. routine monitoring and evaluation as required by your donor, or targeting / needs analysis efforts). To enable you to have feedback readily accessible for future project designs, you will want to think about how you can store the data so that it can be easily retrieved by yourself or other individuals / teams in the future: as an organisation you may consider investing in a data management system across all projects and programmes to facilitate this.
- Use feedback which other organisations have collected: contact other organisations working in the same geographic area or the same sector as you. If applicable to your context, contact the cluster coordinator or people in similar functions to ask them for recent, studies or reports on client perspectives which are relevant to the project you are considering
- Connect to existing representative community groups: local community groups (e.g. women's groups, youth groups, groups representing people with disabilities, peace committees etc.) who work closely with your intended client group will be a useful source of information for you about issues considered to be particularly important by those you are intending on serving through the project.
- Involve your local staff, local partners and civil society organisations: your local staff may originate from the same communities that you are intending to serve and can be an excellent source of information about client perspectives, if you are unable to collect client perspectives directly. Check that you are capturing a diversity of perspectives, as each individual will have certain biases that they may or may not be aware of (e.g. gender, age and diversity). Even if they are not from the intended target community themselves, if your local staff have been working day-to-day with your intended clients through past or current projects, they may have heard feedback informally which could benefit you in your project design decisions. As a broad principle, we recommend that you think about how to systematically involve staff from all levels of seniority and experience in your decision making processes, and actively seek to challenge the culture which communicates that the more senior the position one holds, the higher the value of their opinion.

ACTION 2:
INFORM AND COLLECT

This is one of the key Actions in your feedback cycle: the point at which you obtain the feedback of your clients which you intend to use to inform your project design. There can be a number of ways in which you can do this, which the following guidance will talk you through. In all cases, we will focus on helping you to ensure that the feedback you collect is actionable and minimises burden on clients - and on you!

If you are collecting new feedback from your clients, an integral part of the process will be to inform your intended clients before you implement the feedback channel about your organisation, why you are collecting their feedback and how you will report back to them about the decisions which have been taken.

By implementing Action 1, Assess and Prepare, you will have planned out who you want to collect feedback from, what feedback you want to collect, and how. You will have made a decision about whether you will (a) use existing feedback data (which your organisation has previously collected, or that which has been collected by other actors), or (b) collect new feedback data. Your choice between these two options will have been informed by your information needs, available time, resources and team capacity.

If you have selected option (a) use existing feedback data, you should move on to Action 3, Compile and Present, where you get your data ready for analysis and interpretation. However, if you have chosen (b) collect new feedback data, then follow the steps below.

BRIEF THE TEAM THAT WILL BE COLLECTING THE FEEDBACK

In your plan you would have identified who will collect the feedback. Brief those people about:

- Who they should be asking feedback from;
- How to access your intended clients (and others in the community whose feedback you also want to collect): perhaps the team leader needs to speak to the camp focal point or community leader in advance, perhaps you have organised transportation for the team to visit the clients that you need to inform the team about;
- Which tools will be used for data collection and how they work/who is responsible for which parts of the data collection, recording and analysis;
- How they should administer the feedback channel: for example, what they should say and not say when conducting a survey or focus group discussion; how to best manage expectations and avoid bias;
- What the purpose is of collecting the feedback, for example, to inform the design of your future project;
- How to handle questions that are likely to come up from the intended clients / other community members. This ability to handle difficult conversations is a key skill to nurture in those staff (or ensure is present in external enumerators)

INFORM THE CLIENTS ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF COLLECTING THEIR FEEDBACK

Before you start asking your intended clients' questions about their perspectives, it's important that you help them to understand why you're asking for their feedback and what they can expect as a result. We advise you cover the following:

- Who you are and which organisation you represent; what the mandate of that organisation is;
- What you would like to ask them about, how long it will take to collect their feedback, how they can clarify or ask questions, and whether they are happy to continue to provide respond to your questions;
- Their informed consent and the anonymity of the answers given (if that is the case) and that honest answers are what you are looking for;
- What you will do with the feedback: in this case, inform the clients that you will be using their feedback to inform the project design. You may also want to highlight to your intended clients that other information will also be used to inform the design, so the scope of what you can decide to do may be limited. Explain also if there is a possibility that the project will not be funded; and,
- Explain to your intended clients how you will close the loop with them: that is, how you will report back to inform them about how their feedback informed the project design and whether the project was funded, and respond to any questions they may have.

ASK CLIENTS FOR THEIR FEEDBACK

You would then ask your intended clients for their feedback, using the materials that you developed in Action 1. Some things to remember when proactively collecting feedback:

- If possible, collect client feedback using mobile / tablet applications to help you present and analyse the data in a timely manner to inform decision making;
- Ensure calm environment and avoid other influences such as other people to the interview;
- Speak slowly and clearly when asking questions, particularly if the language in which you are speaking is not the mother tongue of your intended clients;
- Use the questions designed for the survey or focus group discussion, but allow for some open-ended questions at the end so that people can raise any additional issues with you. (e.g. "What else should we be aware of as we design this project? What is most important for us to keep in mind as we design this project? Who has the power in this community to help make this project successful or to resist it?);
- It is important to remain neutral and encourage honest answers (e.g. try not looking overly pleased or happy when they give positive responses);
- Paraphrase the answers given to open questions back to the interviewee before recording them to make sure you really understand what they are trying to say;
- Note down the responses to the questions clearly, so you or others can understand them clearly later on; and,
- Thank the clients for providing their feedback, and remind them again what your organisation will do with their feedback and when and how you will close the loop with them, to explain what the outcome of the design and proposal submission processes.

TIPS ON OVERCOMING COMMON CHALLENGES

YOU DON'T HAVE ACCESS TO YOUR INTENDED CLIENTS (E.G. BECAUSE OF SECURITY, WEATHER OR DISTANCE)

During the Action 1, you would have hopefully identified this challenge in thinking through how you would collect feedback. Possible options to deal with limited access which you can consider include: remote communication methods (such as telephone calls to clients, SMS surveys or using social media), asking for client feedback via a proxy (e.g. by asking your partner in the locality to administer the feedback channel on your behalf), or employing locally based enumerators to collect the feedback (more professional research firms may often have a representative in the capital / in the big city where you're based who you can make arrangements with, and who will supervise the data collectors on your behalf).

THE COMMUNITY LEADERS / ELDERS EXPECT YOU TO ASK THEM TO REPRESENT THE COMMUNITY'S INTERESTS

It is often appropriate to first communicate your intentions in asking for client feedback and to explain the topics that you would like to explore with community leaders or elders. Many will also expect you to ask them for their opinion (even if they are not your target group!). You can still do this, and in doing so explain to them that you would also like to speak to other members of the community to capture additional information. Be mindful that they may direct you to specific members of the community who will reinforce what they have told you, so specify that you would like to speak to a certain group. You may even indicate that you would like to do a random sampling, to help you to ensure that you collect feedback from the intended clients of your project.

YOUR OWN STAFF ARE COLLECTING THE FEEDBACK (RATHER THAN USING AN INDEPENDENT DATA COLLECTOR) AND YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE EFFECT THIS WILL HAVE ON HOW CLIENTS RESPOND

To reduce courtesy bias, you can take precautionary measures. These include informing responders that candid answers are more likely to influence programme delivery, using technology tools that can provide for anonymity (e.g. email survey) or in the case of face-to-face data collection, using volunteers from other programmes who are not known by the respondents to collect data. You can also consider making an agreement with a local university or another organisation to carry out the interviews on behalf of your agency. In case the person collecting the data is a volunteer for or a staff member of your organisation (and particularly if they are known to the clients or are wearing organisational visibility), it is most important to stress the anonymity of the answers given and that honest answers are what you are looking for.

YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT RAISING EXPECTATIONS OF YOUR CLIENTS, WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW IF THE PROJECT WILL BE FUNDED, OR IF IT WILL GO AHEAD IN A CERTAIN WAY

You can manage the expectations of your clients in a number of ways: inform your intended clients about the reasons why you are collecting their feedback; inform them that there is a possibility that the project won't go ahead at all, or that certain activities may not be included; and close the loop with them once you know whether the project will go ahead and in what form.

ACTION 3:
COMPILE AND PRESENT

In this Action, you will take the feedback data which you have obtained (either you have collected it yourself, or you have obtained it from other sources) and you will pull all the information together into one place and present it in such a way that can facilitate the interpretation which you will do in the next Action.

COLLATE AND COMPILE THE FEEDBACK DATA

We recommend collecting feedback electronically, but where this has not been done, you will have to first transcribe your paper-based responses to surveys or interviews etc. into an electronic format. If you have collected data from several different places, you will need to pull all that together into one place. Finally, you will need to check the data for clerical errors and clean up the data (e.g. check that spellings of key words are consistent so that they show up when you run any analysis).

DISAGGREGATE YOUR DATA, AND RUN SOME SIMPLE STATISTICAL ANALYSES

In Action 1, you would ideally have identified which identity characteristics to capture when collecting your feedback data, such as gender and age, and any other factors particularly relevant to your project. If you are using feedback data from other sources, in many cases data on respondents' gender and age will be shown. Your task now is to disaggregate your feedback data by these factors. Assuming you had a large enough number of respondents of a certain group, you can run some simple statistical analyses to highlight differences in feedback between different groups (between men and women, for example).

IDENTIFY KEY THEMES AND ISSUES

As you go through any qualitative feedback you have received, we recommend you highlight key themes and issues that seem to be coming up: is a particular issue coming up in the feedback amongst one gender or another, a particular age group or people of a certain social / ethnic background? Remember that this is not the point of the feedback cycle in which you are trying to interpret why these key themes may be appearing, or may be different between groups. There may be contradictions in what you are seeing: present them nonetheless: your task at this point is solely to highlight areas which you and the team can interrogate and attempt to interpret later.

PRESENT THE FEEDBACK DATA IN A WAY WHICH IS ACCESSIBLE AND CAN BE EFFECTIVELY INTERPRETED

You may consider presenting the analysis of the feedback in graphs / tables, or highlighting particularly telling quotes which convey the sentiments of your intended clients. The way the data was collected can have a significant influence over how clients' respond, so make sure that alongside this you present precise information about how the feedback was collected, from whom, where, when and by whom. Make sure to tailor the format of your report / presentation to your audience and the situation in which the data will be reviewed. For example, if the findings should be presented at meetings, a PowerPoint presentation might be useful, while a short and informative report is easier to print and share. If the audience will be interested in different aspects of the data, an interactive dashboard might be most suitable.

TIPS ON OVERCOMING COMMON CHALLENGES

YOU DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO TRANSCRIBE THE DATA

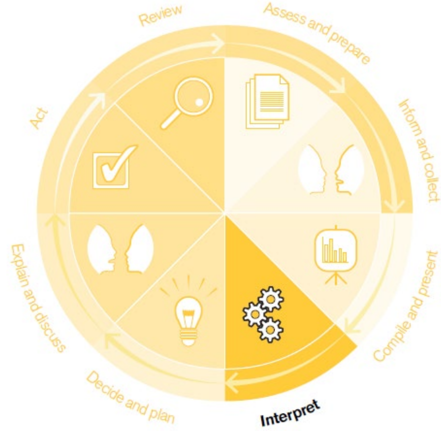
In many contexts it is appropriate to collect feedback data using tablets or smartphones, which can be bought inexpensively for the project / programme, and will save the team a lot of time in not having to transcribe the data from paper-based formats, and will reduce the time needed for cleaning the data also. We recommend that you identify the core themes that you need to collect feedback on so you can narrow down the number of questions that you ask of clients to the really necessary information, giving you less data to transcribe (and analyse later).

YOU LACK THE SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE WITHIN THE TEAM TO ANALYSE AND PRESENT THE FEEDBACK DATA

While there can be value in running more complex statistical analysis and triangulation of the feedback data, much can be gained from presenting the data in simple charts and graphs or creating pivot tables, using Excel. PowerPoint also has an option to create graphs once you have your numbers or percentages calculated. Short online instructions or courses can be found to support your team members to run these simple analyses.[8] Many online survey tools which can be used for digital data collection also offer basic data visualisation and reports.[9]

ACTION 4:
INTERPRET

Once you have compiled and presented your data, your next Action is to interpret the feedback data. In order to better understand the feedback and what factors are driving the perspectives you are hearing, you may often choose to interpret the feedback data alongside other data sources, such as your monitoring data, context analysis and your teams' own experience.



PRESENT SUGGESTED INTERPRETATIONS AND OPTIONS

As you prepare the data for decision makers to review, you may include some suggested interpretations of the data: what can you offer about what this feedback means for the design? What are the design options that would satisfactorily address the feedback? Remember that those satisfactory options may be different for different client groups.

DISCUSS WHAT IS BEHIND THE FEEDBACK

We can only ever know the revealed perspectives of clients: clients will make a conscious decision about what to tell you (just as you make constant appraisals about what you tell other people). You should think about what is behind the feedback you are receiving: what are the underlying issues or concerns, desires or needs that the client is trying to have met? Intended clients may ask for a certain service because that is all that they are aware of, while it may be that another service which they are not aware of would better meet their need and be more preferable to them if they were aware that it were an option.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST THE FEEDBACK DATA WITH OTHER INFORMATION SOURCES

Look at the other information sources that you're considering as part of your project design process, for example, the donor call for proposals, sector best practice, research and evidence on the topic and your own experience: where does the feedback data corroborate the other information, where does it contradict it? Ask yourselves why there may be differences between different information sources you have. Could it be that, while very rigorous, the latest research on the intervention you were considering has been conducted in a context which is quite different to the one you're considering implementing a project in? In this case, what does the feedback data tell you about how you might adapt the recommendations of that research or disregard its recommendations? How does the feedback data compare to your own experience of the needs and preferences of the intended client group and from what you've heard from them in the past. Sense check the data in this way.

DIG DEEPER INTO THE FINDINGS THROUGH DISCUSSIONS WITH KEY INFORMANTS OR FOCUS GROUPS

Sometimes feedback data will still leave some open questions which your team cannot answer, but decides may be important for the project to understand better. In this case, we recommend discussing the survey results with your intended client group in a focus group discussion, flagging what the first set of data appears to show, and asking the clients for their perspectives on the reasons why you may be receiving that feedback. You can also ask other key informants for their perspective to help you to interpret the data in a group or 1:1 basis

Photo: IRC

CONSIDER INVOLVING CLIENT REPRESENTATIVES IN THE INTERPRETATION OF YOUR FEEDBACK DATA

You may choose to involve your intended clients or other members of the community in working with you from the outset to interpret the feedback data. This approach can empower your intended clients to participate in the decision making process, and can provide you with valuable perspectives on the feedback data you're receiving. As with anyone interpreting feedback data, remember that such a group will come with their own particular biases.

TIPS ON OVERCOMING COMMON CHALLENGES

THERE ARE TOO MANY DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES AMONGST OUR CLIENTS, AND YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF THEM

Your intended clients are not a homogenous group, even if you're targeting a very narrow sub-set of the population (e.g. female youths aged 18-35 with disabilities living in a certain municipality): you should expect to hear different perspectives coming from different people. Also note that what the same people tell you may also change over time. Your role is to highlight as many of the differences as possible, by looking for key trends and common themes amongst your disaggregated data, and to acknowledge that you will not be able to satisfy everyone's every need and preference with a single project (or even a lifetime of projects!).

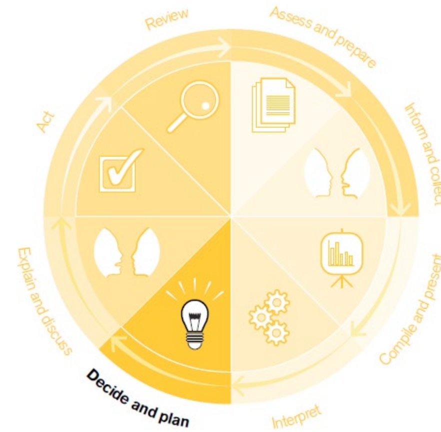
YOU DON'T HAVE THE CAPACITY IN THE TEAM TO EFFECTIVELY ANALYSE FEEDBACK DATA

It can often be a challenge to make sense of large amounts of qualitative information in a short space of time. We advise that you focus on asking fewer questions (max. 10) on a limited number of key themes. This can help you to have less data to analyse, providing just the most important information you need. We also advise you to primarily use closed questions (for example, offering a statement and then to ask for responses using a 5-point Likert scale). Open questions can be used just for key questions, resulting in less qualitative information for your team to process. We highly recommend this combination of quantitative and qualitative information to help you to make well-informed decisions.

YOU TEAM ALL HAVE DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON WHAT THE DATA MEANS OR THE BEST OPTIONS TO ADDRESS IT

It will be highly likely that you have certain biases which influence the way that you interpret the feedback data: biases can relate to specific genders, ages, people of different social / ethnic backgrounds, or people with vulnerabilities or disabilities, or to a host of different factors, and can be both positive and negative: you may find yourself instinctively favouring a project which targets a certain group which you care about particularly, or you may lend more credit to the view-points of one group or individual or another. It can be helpful to discuss the feedback you have received as a group, involving staff members from different backgrounds, positions and levels of the hierarchy with different biases and perspectives. You may even consider involving a Client / Stakeholder Reference Group (comprising representatives from your intended clients, the wider target community and other stakeholders) to help bring different perspectives to the interpretation of the feedback data. If staff are hired with responsive competencies in mind, and with practice over time, you will become more aware of your own biases when thinking about information you are presented with and better able to reveal and leave those biases aside when interpreting the feedback data

ACTION 5:
DECIDE AND PLAN



Once you have interpreted the feedback data, and outlined some options for the project design, your next action will be to make your design decisions, and plan out how you will reflect those decisions in your proposal and project documents.

MAKE A DECISION ABOUT WHO YOU WILL TARGET, TO ADDRESS WHICH NEED AND WITH WHICH INTERVENTION

With your analysis and interpretation available to you, your team should now make a decision about the project design: what is your overall objective, for whom, and what methodology / modality will you use to deliver that objective.

DOCUMENT YOUR DECISIONS

We recommend you record the justifications for your decisions. Recording your decisions can be helpful for you to explain your decision now (e.g. in the proposal) or in the future (to the team members that will deliver the project). Given that significant time often passes between projects being designed and implemented, with changes in staff, having the justification for your design decisions documented for internal use can help you / the future team to check whether the decision is still valid in the current context and with the latest data and information. Decisions documented in this way can also help inform future decisions about project adaptation or the design of other projects. Documentation of design decisions also facilitates greater transparency and can support Action 6, Explain and Discuss, where you close the loop with clients – especially if there has been staff turnover.

CONSIDER INVOLVING CLIENT REPRESENTATIVES IN DESIGN DECISION MAKING

If you decided to involve client representatives in interpreting the feedback data (Action 4), you may also choose to involve them in making decisions about the project design, and specifically how to address the different feedback that you have received in the choice of project objectives, target groups and intervention approach. Again, be conscious about the bias that your selected group may bring to these decisions.

TIPS ON OVERCOMING COMMON CHALLENGES

THE PERSON WRITING THE PROPOSAL IS NOT THE ONE WHO HAS UNDERSTANDING OF THE FEEDBACK DATA

If you have presented your feedback data in a simple, and accessible format (as advised under Action 3), and documented your interpretations and decisions, this information can be sent to the person writing the proposal. With the information presented in this way he / she will be better able to effectively reflect the feedback when they are drafting the proposal, and would be able to extract compelling charts / graphs into the proposal to justify a certain design decision. If needed, you can have a meeting or a call with that person to talk through the feedback and your recommendations and decisions.

THE FEEDBACK SUGGESTS A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO THE ONE ADVOCATED FOR BY THE DONOR (OR SUGGESTED BY SECTORAL BEST-PRACTICE OR ANY OTHER SOURCE OF INFORMATION WHICH YOU NEED TO CONSIDER WHEN MAKING YOUR DESIGN CHOICES)

This is a common challenge which many teams struggle with. Many donors will be open to you suggesting an alternative intervention strategy if you can justify and substantiate with evidence (such as robust client feedback data). If you see that you would like to recommend a radically different approach to that which the donor has communicated, we recommend that you raise this with them early in your preliminary discussions. You may need to advocate towards your colleagues in charge of fundraising to also convince them to support you in this approach, as some may tend to recommend rigidly following the call for proposals in order to maximise competitiveness. However, a proposal can be even more competitive if you’re able to show that it is client-responsive!

ACTION 6:
EXPLAIN AND DISCUSS

In this next Action, you "close the loop" with your clients to report back to them what you've heard and what decisions you have taken about the project design.

EXPLAIN TO YOUR INTENDED CLIENTS THE FEEDBACK YOU HEARD FROM THEM

Your first step is to tell your intended clients what feedback you heard from them. Be mindful to not expose any particular individual or group who gave any sensitive feedback, rather speaking about general trends that you have identified through your analysis, and flagging if you noted that there were certain exceptions to the trends.

EXPLAIN TO YOUR CLIENTS HOW YOU ANALYSED AND TOOK DECISIONS ABOUT HOW TO RESPOND TO THE FEEDBACK

It will be important to explain to your intended clients that there was other information that you also considered when making your decision: this may include, amongst other factors, the donor's requirements, technical best practice and competing needs. Be mindful that you convey that their feedback was given equal importance in the decision making process as these other factors (assuming that you did give it that equal weight, as this guidance helps you to do).

INFORM YOUR CLIENTS ABOUT THE DECISION YOU HAVE TAKEN

This is the key part of closing the loop: explaining what has been done with the feedback that the intended clients provided to you. You would explain to your intended clients what is proposed to happen under the project, and how their feedback has been reflected in those design decisions. If you are still waiting for a response from your donor (as to whether your project has been funded) when you are closing the loop, make this clear. Or, if you are closing the loop after you have received a response from the donor, you can still explain the process you went through and the design decisions that you made, and indicate – if relevant – whether you will look for other funding.

OPEN UP THE CONVERSATION FOR QUESTIONS AND FURTHER DISCUSSION

Your clients may have questions about the design decisions you have explained. You may be able to respond to those questions straight away (e.g. if they are asking for clarification about the decision making process or the decision itself) or you would note those down and refer them back to others in your team to respond to soon after. If the particular needs and interests of the intended client group have not been met through your design decisions, you may choose to open up a discussion with the group about other ways that those needs may be met (e.g. there may be some actions that the intended clients could take themselves, which you can help them to identify; or you may hope to secure funding under another project to address the needs of the intended client group that have not been met).

TIPS ON OVERCOMING COMMON CHALLENGES

YOU FIND IT DIFFICULT TO TELL CLIENTS THAT YOU HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO ADDRESS THEIR FEEDBACK

It will never be possible to address every client's need and preference, and so you should expect that not everyone will be completely happy with the information you give them about the outcome of a decision making process. However, there are techniques that you can use to facilitate the process of communicating feedback that clients don't want to hear, and to help you to manage the process of receiving negative feedback yourselves.

YOU ARE NOT ABLE TO PROVIDE INFORMATION CLIENTS WANT TO KNOW

Sometimes your intended clients will want to know information that you don't have. For example, they may want to know about another service provided by your organisation or another organisation. In this case, you can capture this as feedback to be logged in your feedback registry, and refer it to another team in your organisation or another organisation to get back to the intended clients with the information. At other times, the clients may want to know information about the reasons for their feedback not being addressed which you are not able to provide. For example, an outside authority / another actor may have blocked your proposal to respond to the feedback in a certain way, and your management team may have made a decision to not communicate that on to clients for fear of breeding resentment and frustrations towards that outside authority / other actor. In such cases, it will be important for your management team to provide you with a clear and consistent statement about what you can say and not say to your intended clients.

SIGNIFICANT TIME HAS PASSED BETWEEN COLLECTING THE FEEDBACK AND RECEIVING A DECISION ON THE PROPOSAL

If you expect a long period of time to pass between the point at which you are collecting feedback and when you will get a decision on the proposal, you may consider closing the loop twice: once when your proposal has been submitted, to inform the intended clients what you heard and what design decisions you took; and a second time when you know the outcome of the proposal. If the context has also changed significantly in this time, you may also want to update your information about clients' perspectives, to ensure that the design decisions are still relevant to and for them.

YOU CANNOT REPORT BACK TO THE SAME CLIENTS AS THOSE WHO GAVE YOU THE FEEDBACK

It may be that you received feedback anonymously, that you did not collect the names or contact details of the clients providing you the feedback, or perhaps the specific people who you consulted have since moved on (for example, with a migratory population). Even in these cases, it's still important and possible to close the loop. We recommend that in any of these types of cases that you hold an open information session with the intended target group of clients and their community. Reporting back to those people what feedback you have heard, how you used it to inform your decisions and how the project will go ahead (or not) serves two functions: (1) it shows the community that you listen and value their perspectives, and are making an effort to communicate back to them; and (2) it is likely that the people attending that information session will pass the information on to others in the target community, helping to spread your feedback to those who need to hear it. You can also think about using more than one communication channel, such as a combination of community meetings, email, social media, phone calls, noticeboards or SMS blasts (with your choice informed by context and analysis of your clients' literacy and access to internet / phones etc).

CLIENTS SPEAK MANY DIFFERENT LANGUAGES AND SOME ARE ILLITERATE

Make sure you identify the right channels for communicating the findings and planned actions. There are many different ways to reach your clients such as organising community meetings, focus group discussions, emails, social media and phone calls. Posters and noticeboards are an option for literate populations. Provide the information in the most common languages spoken by your clients.

ACTION 7:
ACT

At the design phase, the action of “Act” essentially involves you reflecting your design decisions in the proposal, as well as referring feedback that you have received on to other organisations who may be able to address it.

REFLECT YOUR DESIGN DECISIONS IN THE YOUR LOGFRAME, WORKPLAN AND M&E PLAN

Once the broad design decisions have been made, you will need to reflect those decisions in the activities you select, and in your plans for activity scheduling and sequencing, resourcing (both human resources and material), for the way that you will manage the project, and communicate and coordinate with others (including your future clients). You may consider including indicators in your logframe and / or M&E plan to measure how responsive your project is being and to track levels of client satisfaction throughout the delivery. Remember to disaggregate your indicators by gender, age and other categories relevant to your context and client group.

BUILD INTO YOUR DESIGN, PROPOSAL, M&E FRAMEWORK AND BUDGET PLANS FOR ENSURING THAT YOUR IMPLEMENTATION IS CLIENT-RESPONSIVE

This is also the time to think about how you will help your project delivery be more client-responsive: build in structures, processes and resources into your proposal and budget to support client-responsive project delivery. Specific things that you may want to consider include:

- Time in your workplan in which to implement Action 1, Assess and Prepare to plan out what feedback you will collect, from whom, and how during implementation. Many donors will be open to you allowing this time in the first month (or more with a longer project);
- Activity lines in your workplan to reflect the points at which you will collect feedback and make decisions about how to respond to it: you can block these out even if you have not yet made specific decisions about which channels you will use. We recommend: (1) establishing one or more reactive feedback mechanisms in the first month, and running them throughout the project; (2) proactively collecting feedback at the mid-point of the project for projects of 12 months, and at least once a year for projects which are longer. You may also want to identify the meetings (e.g. team meetings / project or grant review meetings) at which you will review, interpret and make decisions about how to respond to the feedback that you have received / collected over the preceding period of time.
- Identifying roles, responsibilities and accountabilities within the team for implementing the 8 Actions and investing in enabling structures, processes and incentives; and,
- Budget to cover the required staff members who will implement the 8 Actions

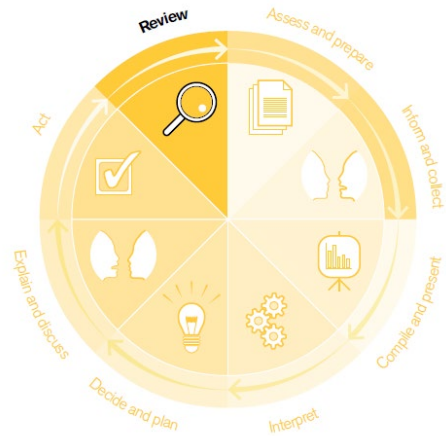
RECORD OR REFER FEEDBACK THAT HAS NOT BEEN ADDRESSED IN YOUR DESIGN

There may be a certain amount of feedback that you received which you were not able, or decided not to address through your project design. In these cases, you may want to refer that feedback on to other teams within your organisation, or other organisations who may be better placed to respond.

WE CANNOT REFLECT OUR ANALYSIS AND DECISIONS IN THE PROPOSAL FORMAT
Typically, you will record your design decisions in your proposal rather than in a separate project design document. Clearly, one of your key considerations here is to make the proposal as compelling and as competitive as possible, to increase your chances of the project being funded. It's important for you to know that most donors will be very supportive of you proposing an alternative intervention strategy to that which they have specified in the call for proposals, so long as it is well justified and evidenced in the proposal.

As advised under Action 5, you may also want to reflect more detail about your design decisions, and perhaps information that you would not want to share with the donor, in a way which provides a useful point of reference for your team in the future. Consider documenting the different options that you considered, the evidence that informed them, and your conclusions in a separate project design document. Often the people implementing a project will be different in whole or in part to those who designed it: such an internal document can be a highly beneficial source of information for that team, or for you / others designing projects in the future. Consider also sharing this analysis with other organisations operating in the sector who may be able to address it, such as another NGO with more flexible funding or even the local authority.

ACTION 8:
REVIEW



In this final stage of the Feedback Cycle, you will review how the process went, and whether there is any learning that you would like to identify about how you might repeat certain things which went well, or make changes when you are to design another project. You will probably choose to do this once your proposal has been submitted given time constraints.

IDENTIFY WHAT WENT WELL ABOUT THE PROCESS

Either independently, or if at all possible together with other team members, reflect back on the processes you used or the decisions you made to identify what you thought went particularly well. Identify what you would like to do again the same or in a similar way in the future. Consider documenting these and filing them in a place which can be easily retrieved by you or other teams for future design processes.

IDENTIFY WHAT DIDN'T GO SO WELL ABOUT THE PROCESS

Then reflect on what didn't go so well, asking yourselves why, and identifying what you would want to try to do differently next time. Again, document and carefully file those notes.

SHARE YOUR LEARNING AMONGST YOUR TEAM, WITH OTHER TEAMS IN YOUR ORGANISATION / COUNTRY PROGRAMME, AND WITH OTHER ORGANISATIONS

In order that you and others can benefit from the learning that you have identified, you will need to find appropriate ways to share that information. It may be that some of the learning concerns organisational culture, policies, structures and processes: in such cases, you would need to identify the appropriate forum to share this with those members of your country programme or organisation (often senior management and / or M&E colleagues) who have the ability to address the learning.

CONSIDER INVOLVING YOUR CLIENTS IN THE REVIEW OF THE FEEDBACK MECHANISM

Again at this final phase in the feedback cycle, we recommend that you consider involving clients in the process of reviewing how the feedback mechanism worked from their perspective.

TIPS ON OVERCOMING COMMON CHALLENGES

ONCE THE PROPOSAL IS SUBMITTED, WE WANT TO MOVE ON TO THE NEXT IMPORTANT THING
Often we can neglect to give time to reflection and learning. However, even just 5 or 10 minutes of independent thought and a few notes saved on your team file about what you learned can be extremely helpful for informing future processes. The reflection and learning process doesn't need to be complicated or drawn out. If you really don't have time at the end of one design process, when you come to Action 1 of the process next time round, start off by reviewing and reflecting on the last process you used.

YOU HAVE HIGH STAFF TURNOVER, THE NEXT PROJECT WILL BE IMPLEMENTED BY OTHER INDIVIDUALS
Make sure you document the process and the learning well and the aim of the process is clarified during the handover process.

6.RECOMMENDATIONS: CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR CLIENT-RESPONSIVE DESIGN

As detailed in Section 5, there are a number of practical steps that humanitarian teams can take to implement more client-responsive project design and to overcome the challenges which many of them typically face in this process.

There are also a number of steps that humanitarian leadership and donors can take to create the structural conditions and incentives which enable client-responsiveness in the design process. The following section provides a number of recommendations to humanitarian leadership and donors on ways that they can facilitate this.

Photo: Tim Jenner / IRC

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

COMMUNICATE THROUGH WORDS AND ACTIONS THAT CLIENT-RESPONSIVENESS IS AS IMPORTANT AS FUNDRAISING

The humanitarian sector continues to be faced with the challenge of unmet needs: in many cases, the amount of funding available for the humanitarian response does not nearly address the extent of the humanitarian need. Unsurprisingly, the leadership of many humanitarian organisations thus routinely prioritise revenue generation as a key organisational goal. The performance of individuals – and thus their potential for career development and job security - may also be judged based on their ability to secure income for the organisation's work. With such a strong incentive to fundraise, it can be difficult for teams to prioritise client-responsiveness, particularly if client feedback does not squarely align with what the donor is asking for, or with the intervention which is likely to bring in the most income. To help counter this, senior leaders of humanitarian organisations need to actively communicate to their teams that client-responsiveness is as important to them as fundraising. They can do this by including client-responsiveness as a key criteria in programme and individual performance goal setting and assessment, or as a key requirement in making a go / no go decision on a proposal, as well as through public messaging across their teams.

PROMOTE CLIENT-RESPONSIVENESS THROUGH MODELLING RESPONSIVE BEHAVIOUR IN INTERACTIONS WITH STAFF

Leaders can also promote client-responsive programming through modelling responsive behaviour in their interactions with their own staff. In many organisations, senior leadership do not actively and systematically involve more junior staff members in decision making and are not transparent about the rationale for their decisions. This is rarely the result of ill-will, but it can have a profound effect on the engagement of staff in the organisation, and the likelihood that they will want to share their own perspectives with senior staff members. If senior staff members actively seek feedback from their teams and close the loop with them; if they demonstrate that they value feedback and the individual who voiced it or passed it on will not suffer from a negative reaction, a culture of trust and communication can be created. Where this exists within the organisation, it is more likely that staff will model this in turn in their interactions with clients.

ALLOCATE UNRESTRICTED RESOURCES TO TEAMS TO INVEST IN CLIENT-RESPONSIVE PROJECT DESIGN

Many humanitarian organisations are largely dependent on grant funding, and rarely do donors permit funds to be used for project design in advance of a project approval date. Teams must thus use resources from existing grants to develop new projects, or unrestricted funding. While teams can collect client feedback about aspirations for future programming as part of the monitoring and evaluation of existing projects, unrestricted resources can allow teams to explore the perspectives of clients in new target areas and develop a more in-depth understanding of their priority needs, outcomes and intervention strategies for future work. Leadership play a major role in allocating often scarce unrestricted resources to the process of client-responsive project design.

SIMPLIFY PROPOSAL REVIEW PROCESSES TO ALLOW FOR MORE CLIENT CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT DURING PROJECT DESIGN

There is often a limited amount of time between a call for proposals being released and the submission date, and the time in which teams have to design a project is further compressed by requirements imposed by the organisation for lengthy review processes by technical and business development teams. If humanitarian leadership can streamline the review process and thus shorten the timeframe for review, teams will have more time to invest in client-responsive project design.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS

CLEARLY COMMUNICATE IN CALLS FOR PROPOSALS THAT ALTERNATIVE INTERVENTION STRATEGIES BASED ON CLIENT FEEDBACK ARE WELCOME

Teams will be encouraged by their business development colleagues and senior management to closely align their project design with the intervention strategy articulated in the call for proposals in order to maximise their chances of success. If donors are truly willing to receive alternative proposals on how an outcome can be achieved based on well-evidenced client perspectives then they must be explicit in communicating that they will consider such submissions.

EXTEND THE TIME FOR PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT WHERE CONTEXTUALLY APPROPRIATE TO ALLOW FOR MORE CLIENT CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT DURING DESIGN

Many teams already struggle with the limited time available to them to design a project and prepare a proposal, let alone collect and review new client feedback and use that to inform the design. Donors can enable teams to obtain relevant client feedback and use that to inform their design decisions by providing longer amounts of time between a call for proposals being released and a submission date.

INCLUDE CLIENT-RESPONSIVENESS AS AN ESSENTIAL FUNDING CRITERION IN CALLS FOR PROPOSALS

Donors can also play a fundamental role in setting the priorities which humanitarian organisations adopt. Many calls for proposals include questions asking the applicant to explain how client perspectives have influenced the design and will be taken into consideration during implementation.However, typically these questions can (and often will) be responded to with a stock answer, and the applicant does not face any penalty in assessment for doing so. We recommend donors are more specific in the framing of such questions and that they include client-responsiveness as an essential funding criterion.

PROVIDE AND ENCOURAGE APPLICANTS TO ALLOCATE RESOURCES TO CLIENT-RESPONSIVENESS

Donors can actively encourage applicants to allocate resources to activities supporting the implementation of the feedback cycle by specifying a minimum monetary amount or percentage allocation of the budget that should be spent on the client feedback cycle. Whilst many donors would not object to an applicant including such resources in their budget, unless they actively encourage it, it is likely that client-responsiveness will be de-prioritised by teams over funding for staff positions or project activities.

REQUIRE APPLICANTS TO PLAN FOR AN INCEPTION PHASE IN WHICH TO UPDATE AND FURTHER DEVELOP THE DESIGN BASED ON CLIENT FEEDBACK AND OTHER CONTEXTUAL CHANGES

Often the context and clients perspectives change in the time between a proposal being submitted and the start date of the project. Applicants should be actively encouraged by their donors to build in an inception phase (of a duration appropriate to the context and timeframe of the project) in which to verify whether the proposed design is still relevant to clients, and if not, what changes need to be made.

PERMIT APPLICANTS TO INCLUDE A CONTINGENCY LINE IN THEIR BUDGET AND ALLOW FOR MAXIMUM FLEXIBILITY BETWEEN BUDGET CATEGORIES TO ADAPT THE PROJECT BASED ON CLIENT FEEDBACK

Rarely do donors permit agencies to include contingency lines in their budgets out of concern that it will be used as a slush fund. However, a donor can promote use of a contingency line where it is used to respond to client feedback. Further, donors can encourage adaptation based on client feedback by providing maximum flexibility across budget categories without the requirement for a grantee to seek approval from the donor.

NOTES

1 The IRC has chosen to use the term client when referring to those people we serve, as it signals our belief that they have a right and the power to decide to what kind of aid and services they need and want. We have chosen the term client over the more commonly used term, beneficiary, which we believe has a more passive connotation: it implies that people are passive 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.

2 For more information on the spectrum of participation, refer to Groupe URD, Participation Handbook, https://www.urd.org/Participation-Handbook

3 For example, the excellent guidance from ALNAP and CDA, Closing the Loop: Effective Feedback in Humanitarian Contexts, (2014), https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/closing-the-loop-alnap-cda-guidance.pdf

4 This includes a number of studies and observations conducted by ALNAP (http://www.alnap.org/) , CDA (http://cdacollaborative.org/); CDA Collaborative, Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid, http://cdacollaborative.org/publication/time-to-listen-hearing-people-on-the-receiving-end-of-international-aid/ and Ground Truth Solutions (http://groundtruthsolutions.org/)

5 Area 3, Strategy for Sweden's Humanitarian Aid Provided through the Swedish International Development Agency, 2017 – 2020

6 For example, the excellent guidance from ALNAP and CDA, Closing the Loop: Effective Feedback in Humanitarian Contexts, (2014), https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/closing-the-loop-alnap-cda-guidance.pdf

7 For example, the CDA course on humanitarian feedback mechanisms hosted by Disaster Ready, a platform offering free online courses for humanitarian staff: https://ready.csod.com/client/disasterready/default3.aspx?lang=en-US

8 The Microsoft Virtual Academy provides video tutorials on how to use Excel to analyse your data and visualise it in a way that can help managers to use it to take decisions.

9 GTS training package on 'How to establish and manage a systematic community feedback mechanism', Annex 6 (Tools for data collection and analysis) and Annex 9: Comparison of data collection and analysis tools

GUIDANCE ON CLIENT RESPONSIVE PROJECT DESIGN

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.

APRIL 2018

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