



FEEDBACK TO ACTION

Strategies to improve the use of feedback in programmatic decision-making

Conducted and prepared in partnership with:

International Rescue Committee

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last few years, humanitarian agencies have placed increasing focus on accountability to affected populations. With increasing donor demands and a growing number of frameworks, standards and initiatives with a focus on the role and power of intended program beneficiaries (e.g. Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP), Sphere Standards, the localization agenda and the participation revolution), agencies are making greater efforts to collect feedback from those they serve. However, collecting feedback does not imply that feedback is routinely used. Likewise, there is far more literature available on how to establish feedback mechanisms than on how to support the analysis and use of that feedback.

This study aims to identify factors that enable feedback utilization in programmatic decision-making within humanitarian agencies. Our own experience and preliminary research suggest that beneficiary feedback, though deemed important, often gets ‘crowded out’ by other types of information during decision-making processes. This is particularly the case when staff are under time and resource constraints. Acknowledging the very human problem of feeling stressed to make decisions when there usually is more information to consider than choices and time available, we pulled on behavioral science to identify strategies and tools that can ease decision-making under such conditions. We hypothesized that if provided with tools and support to ease the process of decision-making, humanitarian agency staff will be more likely to use the feedback they have gathered.

To test this hypothesis, we shared these decision-making tools and guidance with 51 refugee and IDP-serving non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) operating in both urban and rural Uganda. Prior to the intervention, we collected baseline data on feedback practices within these organizations. Four months after a workshop that brought the organizations together to use the tools and learn from each other, we administered a follow-up survey. We also conducted action research and provided coaching support to a small subset of the participants. This component allowed for qualitative institutional analysis through interviews with staff at different levels as well as focus group discussions with beneficiaries and other stakeholders.

The study yielded indicative yet important findings. Though not statistically significant, there were substantive differences in two areas between baseline and follow-up: More agencies reported using feedback in five (5) or more meetings in the last two months and more agencies reported using feedback to make small changes to programming or implementation. The action research identified several institutional factors as most likely to enable feedback including (i) consistent internal processes (e.g. training for all staff and standard operating procedures for feedback collection and handling); (ii) internal learning and reflection processes and (iii) strong senior leadership buy-in to prioritize and resource feedback processes. The challenges of resourcing systems, handling negative feedback and developing common platforms for processing feedback persist. Despite the small sample size and the inability to completely attribute changes to the tools and support we provided, this study shows the promise of improving feedback use through even light-touch tools and through continued strengthening and investment in the nascent processes that organizations are steadily putting in place.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACTV	African Center for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
BF	Beneficiary Feedback
BFM	Beneficiary Feedback Mechanism
BIT	Behavioral Insights Team
CDA	CDA Collaborative Learning Projects
DFID	Department for International Development
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
IRB	Internal Review Board
IRC	International Rescue Committee
NARC	National HIV/AIDS Research Committee (Uganda)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OFDA	Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PRM	(Bureau) of Population, Refugees, and Migration
RCT	Randomized Control Trial
UNCST	Uganda National Council for Science and Technology
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WV	World Vision

BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION



Requesting feedback is standard practice

Multilateral agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) collect and receive various types of feedback from program beneficiaries and other stakeholders. However, collecting feedback does not necessarily mean that feedback is used (Jacobs, 2010; Wood, 2011a; Anderson et al., 2012; Twersky et al., 2013). While many organizations have established formal and informal procedures, feedback mechanisms are only effective if they go beyond the collection and acknowledgement of feedback and actually support analysis and response to the feedback received (Bonino, Jean, Knox-Clarke, 2014). In general, humanitarian agencies do not systematically and deliberately use information from their beneficiaries in determining the type of assistance to provide, to whom, when and how.

The literature on humanitarian feedback mechanisms has grown since the Haiti and Pakistan responses in 2010. Several reports document new and experimental approaches for two-way communication, complaints and response mechanisms tested across large and small-scale responses (Bonino and Warner, 2014). The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), ALNAP and CDA contributed a number of case studies, practical tools and guidance for practitioners wanting to improve program-level and agency-wide accountability and feedback practices. However, “the majority of documents available in the public domain on beneficiary feedback are largely descriptive, normative and ‘aspirational’ — i.e. fact sheets or documents that explain the rationale and expected outcomes from feedback mechanisms and initiatives that increase access to information that increase access to information” (Jean, 2013).

Very few studies have examined the use and impact of feedback mechanisms. ALNAP-CDA research on humanitarian feedback mechanisms and the joint HAP, Save the Children, Christian Aid report “Improving Impact: Do Accountability Mechanisms Deliver Results?” (2013) are among a handful of research reports looking at questions of effectiveness and impact, respectively. By conducting rich and extensive case studies, these projects go beyond the normative prescriptions and general advice that characterize much of the literature. However, none of them examines organizational or decision-making behavior. This research project aims to identify decision-making tools and processes that increase the use of beneficiary feedback in humanitarian action to meet the needs of those we serve while honoring their values, preferences, and dignity. We also aspire to inform the development of policy and practice recommendations to support the move by PRM, OFDA, DFID and other donors to encourage humanitarian agencies to be more responsive to their beneficiaries.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, HYPOTHESES AND OUTCOMES OF INTEREST

There is a significant gap in evidence on strategies to address institutional barriers to the use of feedback in decision-making. Therefore, this project seeks to answer the following core research questions:

- What factors enable feedback utilization in programmatic decision-making processes?

More specifically, the study asks:

- How can refugee and IDP-serving NGOs in Uganda use feedback more effectively in their decision-making?

Reviews of available literature coupled with IRC's ongoing analysis of client-responsive practices in the sector suggest that beneficiary feedback is 'crowded-out' from decision-making processes because it is competing with other, higher prioritized information such as expenditure, procurement, output and activity monitoring data, expert opinion and formal evaluations. Further, we have observed that agencies may not consider or act on information from beneficiaries for at least two reasons:

- 1 Humanitarian agencies perceive other data that is more closely linked to logical framework as well as donor and internal agencies' own reporting requirements to be more important than information from beneficiaries.
- 2 Humanitarian agency staff are unsure of how to interpret information coming from beneficiaries, which may be partial, contradictory or perceived to be 'more subjective' than harder monitoring data. Making sense of beneficiary data is perceived to require greater time and effort under conditions in which time is generally in short supply. Often times this is itself a function of how information is distilled and presented.

Analyzing, interpreting, processing and responding to feedback are critical steps to ensuring that feedback is used. These processes tend to breakdown when working under time constraints. The typical challenges with poor documentation of decision-making processes are often exacerbated by the perceptions of management about the validity and reliability of feedback and its utility in program quality improvements and course corrections. By providing assistance through decision-making tools, our research project creates an opportunity for agencies to document their decision-making processes and to clarify when and how that feedback is to be used.

We expect that if humanitarian agency staff close the feedback loop with their beneficiaries and co-interpret the information they are receiving with those beneficiaries, then this will attach greater importance to beneficiary information and increase the clarity of the information, thus increasing the likelihood that beneficiary information will be used in problem-identification and problem-solving in decision-making.

Further, we expect that if humanitarian agency staff receive support and technical assistance from their own senior management in interpreting beneficiary feedback, then this will also attach greater importance to beneficiary information and increase the clarity of the information, thereby increasing the likelihood that it will be used in decision-making. Nested within this hypothesis is the notion that senior management demand for beneficiary feedback will elevate its importance with frontline decision-makers.

While all these factors are important for getting feedback into use, we focus on individual level action to increase the use of feedback. More specifically, we hypothesize that:

If NGO staff are provided with tools and technical support that reduce the cognitive burden associated with the use of beneficiary feedback, then the staff and organizations will be more likely to use feedback and to use it more effectively.

During this project, we aimed to test the effectiveness of a set of tools while piloting a technical assistance approach. While we are interested in the broad outcomes of frequency and effectiveness of beneficiary feedback, we break these categories down into a number of more specific outcomes.

For the use of the tools, our key outcomes of interest are the following:

- **The emphasis the organization places on beneficiary feedback:** If the research intervention can emphasize the importance of beneficiary feedback to NGO staff and staff appreciate and communicate this, then their organizations should also place greater emphasis on feedback.
- **Individual ability to effectively use feedback:** If the research intervention provides tools to effectively use feedback, then respondents should report greater perceived capacity to use feedback.
- **Frequency of feedback use:** Again, if the research intervention can emphasize and empower people to use feedback, then we should expect the research intervention to have a positive effect on how frequently feedback is used. For instance, the research intervention should have a positive impact on the number of meetings in which participants discuss or engage with feedback.
- **Reported use of feedback:** Given that the research intervention may both emphasize the importance of feedback and empower NGO staff to use it, we should see an increase in feedback leading to the changes in NGO implementation and programming.

We did not specifically test the effectiveness of the coaching accompaniment on the outcomes above. Rather, the coaching accompaniment allowed us to simultaneously gather more in-depth information on the barriers and enablers of feedback utilization through action research while offering bespoke support to a small group of participant NGOs. Further details are provided in the Research Design and Intervention sections.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

To answer the research question, the study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods. To examine the effectiveness of the tools on reported outcomes, we used a pre-post estimation design in which, for each NGO representative, pre-intervention measures of the outcomes were subtracted from measures of the outcomes reported after the intervention. The baseline survey was administered and completed in-person at the start of a workshop in April 2017. The follow-up or endline survey was conducted online and in-person in August and September 2017. Importantly, in the follow-up survey we asked some of the same questions that we had asked in the baseline survey. This then allowed us to see changes over time due to the introduction of our beneficiary feedback tool. We had a fairly high response rate of 75% for the follow-up survey (43 of the 57 respondents from the baseline survey completed at least part of the follow-up survey). This strategy allowed us to estimate the effect of introducing our tool to NGO staff.

Ideally, we would have created a treatment and control group, but given that only 57 individuals from 51 organizations agreed to participate in the study, we were unable, due to considerations of statistical power, to split the sample into these groups. Therefore, we conducted a change over-time analysis that focuses on changes within research subjects. Some of the research questions ask about organization-level outcomes, but given that only one or two representatives from each organization participated, we focus on individual-level outcomes. Therefore, our key unit of analysis is the individual NGO staff member. We also acknowledge that our ability to attribute any detected changes to our intervention is weakened in the absence of a randomized design that would have created a strong counterfactual. We also rely on reported behavior. Given the limited time and resources, verifying actual behavioral changes among all participants was not feasible.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

November 2016	Research, tool, baseline survey design, feedback summit labstorm
December 2016- January 2017	Field testing and revision
December 2016 - April 2017	Recruitment of participants (refugee and IDP-serving NGOs)
April 2017	Baseline survey and intervention (In-country workshop)
July 2017	Action research phase 1
August - September 2017	Follow-up survey (online and in person)
September 2017	Action research phase 2
November 2017	Feedback summit presentation and validation workshop/ closing the loop

ACTION RESEARCH

The action research offered an additional intervention to qualitatively explore the primary research hypothesis as well as to pilot an accompaniment and coaching approach. This short-term engagement (three to four days per agency) allowed us to document the key challenges organizations face in feedback utilization while offering real-time diagnosis of the agency's feedback mechanisms in order to provide options for enhancing feedback practices. Qualitative data gathered as part of the action research is intended to offer a deeper exploration of the research's key questions and complement the quantitative data collected through the baseline and follow-up surveys.

Over the course of two visits to Uganda, CDA worked with a total of six agencies. To gather qualitative data, CDA used its listening methodology in focus group discussions and diagnostic interviews with 'frontline' field staff, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) or Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) staff, program staff, senior leadership, volunteers and community mobilizers as well as affected communities receiving services from the participating agency. This is a semi-structured, iterative approach that allows the interviewees to direct the conversation while ensuring that key questions are addressed. A tailored interview protocol was developed and used to ensure that the conversation encouraged self-assessment of key areas related to existing feedback practices and challenges with feedback utilization.

Staff at multiple levels of the organizational hierarchy were interviewed to ensure a more complete understanding of the culture of feedback utilization within each agency. Focus group discussions were conducted with a subset of the beneficiaries of each organization (including: men, women, community leaders, women's council etc.). When possible, other stakeholders including affected communities who are not receiving services from the NGOs were also interviewed. This provided researchers with a unique perspective and offered a data point from which to triangulate information about the agency's information provision and feedback practices. The final product of the qualitative review included an "Observations and Options" report for each hosting agency. This document details observations of existing feedback systems and utilization practices and their strengths and weaknesses. The document also outlines options to address any deficiencies and improve organizational feedback utilization practices.

CDA established a protocol for the Safeguards for Vulnerable Populations. During the accompaniment visit, staff of participating agencies organized the focus group discussions and sought to include vulnerable populations such as elderly, disabled, women and illiterate in beneficiary focus group discussions. Safeguards for these groups included: 1) the location of the focus group discussion, 2) presentation of information, and 3) receiving consent for participating in the meeting. The focus group discussions were held in areas central to the community that were easily accessible for disabled and elderly beneficiaries. Invitations for the focus group discussion were provided verbally and in written form in order to ensure that illiterate community members had access. Translators with knowledge of all local dialects supported the FGD process to ensure that all beneficiaries were able to participate and understand the conversation. Focus group discussions were small (5-15 participants) and allowed all members to speak and share their experiences through a translator. Consent to participate was also communicated through a translator. Literate community members were asked to read and verbally provide consent and illiterate community members received an oral reading of the consent form by a translator and asked to verbally consent. Program staff did not participate in focus group discussions with beneficiaries in order to ensure confidentiality. However, at the close of the discussion, agency staff was invited to listen and respond to beneficiaries' questions in order to provide, where possible, a real-time feedback collection and response intervention.

Research design protocols and tools were reviewed and approved by IRC's Internal Review Board (IRB) as well as the in-country ethics review board, Uganda National HIV/AIDS Research Council (NARC). The project was registered and approved by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST).

SAMPLE SELECTION AND DESCRIPTION

Our population of interest consisted of all NGOs working with refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) that operate in Uganda. We sought to include international, national, and local level agencies operating both inside Kampala as well as the refugee settlements outside the capital. We obtained a list of such NGOs from the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), the Uganda National NGO Forum and a variety of other sources. The final list contained 90 NGOs. Through office visits, letters, emails and phone calls, we invited all identified NGOs to participate in the study by indicating their interest, confirming the existence of a feedback mechanism/process within their organization and designating a representative to attend our workshop. The representative needed to have (i) worked with the organization for at least a year (ii) familiarity with the organization's feedback systems and practices; and (iii) decision-making power over programming or implementation.

Our final sample included 57 participants from 51 refugee and IDP-serving NGOs operating in Uganda. Given that most humanitarian organizations were still in emergency mode and responding to the massive influx of South Sudanese refugees in late 2016, we consider the turnout to be very significant. Table 1 provides an overview of the basic characteristics of the sample at baseline. As shown, while most of the representatives were Ugandan, they represented a range of local, national and (mostly) international organizations. The NGO's served refugee populations from countries such as South Sudan, DRC, Burundi, Somalia, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Slightly more than a third of the NGO representatives were women.

**TABLE 1:
SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS AT BASELINE**

Number of organizations	51
Percent of Ugandan organizations	33%
Number of nationalities served by the organizations	7
Percent of Ugandan among representatives	89%
Average age of representatives	37
Percent female representatives	37%

Participants in the action research were drawn from the subjects in the primary intervention based on specific eligibility criteria.

These included:

- 1) participation in the primary intervention
- 2) an active feedback mechanism that has been operational for a minimum of six months
- 3) operations in Kampala and/or in refugee settlements
- 4) no mandate to work with minors explicitly (due to IRB restrictions)
- 5) a mandate to provide services to refugees beyond food distribution

Additional agency attributes including size, sector and type of organization (national versus international) were also considered in order to ensure a mixed sample.

The final sample included:

- ☐ **Organization Type:** 4 international and 2 national NGOs
- ☐ **Organization Size:** 3 large, 1 medium and 2 small organizations
- ☐ **Location of Operation Visited:** 3 agencies operating in West Nile Region (responding to the South Sudanese crisis) and 3 agencies operating in Kampala (providing services to urban refugees and IDPs)

Table 2 provides the overall sample and different categories of people consulted during the action research. During the two 10-day visits, we convened focus group discussions and individual interviews, engaging a total of 257 people.

**TABLE 2:
BREAKDOWN OF ACTION RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

AGENCY	STAFF	VOLUNTEERS	BENEFICIARIES	TOTAL
Agency 1	22	6	23	51
Agency 2	11	3	16	30
Agency 3	15	0	23	38
Agency 4	20	5	26	51
Agency 5	7	4	34	45
Agency 6	10	0	32	42
TOTAL	85	18	154	257

To participate in the action research, beneficiaries had to:

- 1) be over the age of 18
- 2) provide written or oral consent to meet and talk with researchers
- 3) be recipients of services from the NGO being accompanied
- 4) be a recipient of the agency's services for a minimum of four months

DESCRIPTION OF INTERVENTION

This research project applies evidence and practices from cognitive psychology, organizational psychology and behavioral economics to expand the knowledge and tools applied within the humanitarian sector. By testing the effectiveness of strategies that seek to incentivize and systematize feedback utilization in decision-making, especially in the face of uncertainty and resource constraints, this study builds on earlier lessons that focused just on the establishment of feedback mechanisms themselves.

The project team established a partnership with Behavioral Insights (BIT) Team North America to assist us in the development of the tool that will serve as the main intervention in this study. Using their expertise in cognitive and social psychology, behavioral science and user design, BIT worked with the project team to identify several plausible, relevant, low-tech strategies that we can share with NGO staff in Uganda to help improve the use of feedback in their programmatic decisions. Over a period of 4 weeks, the project team and IRC developed three options for the tool. We also worked together to incorporate feedback from external focus groups (e.g. during the 2106 Feedback Summit) and from field-testing in Uganda to narrow the options and significantly improve the tool.

The tool aims to facilitate better engagement with feedback by helping organizations/individuals to (i) prioritize and plan (commit future time); (ii) make commitments and be held accountable; and (iii) break down the process of distilling feedback so as to reduce information overload. The tool takes the form of a twelve-page worksheet. The first page of one of the tools is shown in Figure 1 below. The full set of tools (12 pages) can be found in Annex A.

FIGURE 1:
FIRST ACTIVITY IN THE PLANNING AND DECISION-MAKING TOOL

The image shows a worksheet page with a black background and white text. At the top, it says "You can do this exercise alone or as a group." Below that, it says "Use the space below to make a commitment about ways you will include feedback from clients, even when things get stressful." There are two example sentences: "Example: I will invite a client to one SMT meeting per month" and "Example: Next month, I will make inclusion of feedback a mandatory requirement for all project proposals and programmatic changes". At the bottom, there is a form with a yellow header "I will..." and a light blue body with the prompt "Where, when, how, and with whom?" and three empty rows for writing.

It first asks which type of help the respondent wants: 1) help planning (a process for) the incorporation of anticipated feedback or 2) help using or addressing existing feedback.

If the respondent chooses track 1, then s/he is asked to first list what s/he would do (when, where, how and with whom) to include feedback from clients. The person is then asked to list possible barriers to these actions. The person or team then carefully thinks through and writes down the actions that will be taken to overcome these barriers. The tool is based on research on implementation intentions, which shows that thinking through the process of achieving a goal in advance and making “if-then” statements to deal with potential obstacles increases the likelihood of achieving that goal (Gollwitzer and Sheeran, 2006). And finally, the respondent then commits to a date and time for completion of the tasks s/he has listed. The respondent is then told that the research team would provide reminders/follow up on the date and time indicated. Acknowledging that we all struggle with turning our best intentions into action, making external commitments is an effective way of following through (Akbaş et al. 2016; Beshears et al., 2011).

If the respondent chooses track 2, then the person is first asked to write down a few bits of information s/he has received from beneficiaries. The person then writes down a number of actions s/he could take if there were no constraints on what s/he could do. Then, the person is reminded that realistically we all have constraints, so the tool then asks what existing or possible barriers s/he could face to taking the actions s/he has indicated. With respect to each constraint/barrier, the respondent is then asked to think about what s/he can do to overcome these barriers and whom s/he can enlist to help and even assign certain people these tasks to overcome barriers. And finally, the respondent then commits to a date and time for completion of the tasks s/he has listed. The respondent is then told that the research team would provide reminders/follow up on the date and time indicated.

In both tracks, the tool helps respondents to think through the various actions they could take and challenges they face to successful use of beneficiary feedback. Furthermore, the tool accomplishes this in an easy, step-by-step process using clear, accessible language that allows people to sit back and think about the problem in stages and in advance rather than potentially being overwhelmed by all that needs to be done in the moment of response. It also encourages making a personal and external commitment once a clear plan has been developed. In this way, the tool reduces cognitive burden and allows respondents to distill the possibilities while also providing accountability for action.

WORKSHOP



IRC Project Team, Lead Researcher and Project Volunteers
Intervention workshop, Kampala Uganda. April 25, 2017

The workshop that constituted our primary intervention was a one-day event in Kampala, Uganda on April 25, 2017. The primary objective of the workshop was to meet the participants in person, collect background data on feedback practices and share the feedback resources and decision-making tools that had been developed.

At the beginning of workshop, participants received opening remarks from the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), the Uganda National NGO Forum and the IRC's senior leadership. We administered a survey to obtain baseline measures of individual and organizational engagement as well as use of feedback. Participants engaged in teambuilding exercises such as learning about each other's work and sharing their feedback experiences. They also had the opportunity to ask each other questions in plenary and small groups. Using resources supplied by our partner – CDA Collaborative Learning – the IRC shared and discussed a presentation on closing the feedback loops. All participants received a printed copy of ALNAP-CDA's Practitioner Guidance on Effective Feedback in Humanitarian Contexts. In the afternoon sessions, the decision-making tool was introduced and the participants completed an exercise, both alone and in groups, in which they applied the tool to their own organizational contexts, making action plans based on actual or anticipated feedback from their beneficiaries. We then asked participants to commit to using this tool to help improve their use of beneficiary feedback. Throughout the workshop, we offered the participants the opportunity for continued engagement through the second part of our project – the coaching accompaniment. The workshop closed with a final feedback session on the workshop itself and developing a preliminary list of NGOs who self-nominated to participate in the action research.

ACTION RESEARCH ACCOMPANIMENT VISITS

CDA undertook the first-round of action research in July 2017 with three agencies – Plan International Uganda, Caritas International and World Vision Uganda – at their operations in the West Nile region of Uganda. CDA spent time in the region working directly with the staff at their respective field offices in Arua, Yumbe and Adjumani. Agencies operating in the West Nile Region primarily serve the South Sudanese refugee population living in the settlements; however, roughly 30% of services from each agency is also directed to local Ugandan host communities. All three participating agencies were country offices of international NGOs.

The second-round of action research occurred in September 2017 with three agencies – InterAid Uganda, HIAS and the Africa Center for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (ACTV) – working in Kampala, Uganda. Services provided by these agencies respond to the needs of urban refugees and IDPs living in Kampala. Urban refugees in Uganda are predominately from the Great Lakes Region (the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi,) or the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia). InterAid Uganda and ACTV are Ugandan NGOs and HIAS is an international NGO with a small operation.

Data collected at the community level were critical for validation and verification of the strengths and weaknesses of agency feedback mechanisms. Beneficiary feedback was anonymized by CDA and shared with key staff then incorporated into the Observation and Options report. CDA did not make any direct changes to this project based on beneficiary feedback; however, we shared feedback with agencies suggesting that they ‘close the loop’ with their beneficiaries about the project and its outcomes. During focus group discussions, CDA also allowed time for accompanying agency staff to listen to, gather and respond to beneficiary feedback in real time.



CDA team member and volunteers from InterAid Uganda (IAU) during Action Research Visit, September 2017

RESULTS

Using data from the baseline and follow-up surveys, we conducted difference-of-means tests to identify whether there is a significant difference in our key outcomes before and after the introduction of the beneficiary feedback tool. Before turning to these core results, we first present a few basic statistics regarding baseline measures of feedback use and respondent engagement with and use of the tool.



IRC Research Manager discusses baseline results with a subset of project participants and volunteers
September 28, 2017

BASELINE USE OF AND ENGAGEMENT WITH FEEDBACK

From the baseline survey, we have gained a better understanding of how NGOs operating in Uganda and serving refugees and IDPs use and engage with feedback. The vast majority, 89%, does in fact gather formal feedback (e.g. through surveys, focus group discussions, consultations with community leaders, technical visits, evaluation processes, etc.). Therefore, in line with our expectations, the problem is less that organizations do not know what the issues and challenges their beneficiaries experience are; but rather, that NGOs are unable to effectively use this information.

Interestingly, only about 25% of organizations report having received training on the use of feedback in the past, and the majority of which (56%) took place within the last year. Therefore, while feedback is in fact quite widely used, there is great room for improvement given the lack of training and support that organizations have received. This is further illustrated by the fact that only 23% are confident that their organization effectively uses feedback. In addition, feedback is not used very frequently, with only 26% seeking and/or using feedback at least on a weekly basis, 39% on a monthly basis and 30% less than monthly (the remaining respondents were unsure).

The most common way in which feedback is organized or recorded is through reports (92% of our organizations uses this mode). Most often, a small team compiles these reports (68% of organizations). Unsurprisingly, decisions on how to use or address feedback are almost never made on the spot (26% of organizations). Rather, these decisions are made after team members discuss the best way forward but before feedback is formally compiled (83% of organizations). Many organizations (68%) also report that decisions are made after some formal compiling of feedback has taken place. Therefore, while reports are often written, it seems that more often than not these reports are not necessarily a part of the decision-making processes regarding how to respond to feedback. Despite this, it is encouraging that 79% of respondents do report back to beneficiaries that they have received their feedback.

Unfortunately, about half the time (51%), organizations are unable to make changes in line with beneficiary feedback. As one might expect, the most common challenge to incorporating feedback is resource constraints (80% of organizations report this as a key challenge and 57% report that donor restrictions prevent them from being flexible). While our study does not help directly address these main challenges, the tool does allow people to think about the challenges they face (including resources and donor priorities) and how to overcome them in order to best address the feedback given these constraints. We hope that the tool plays an empowering role. More details on the baseline results can be found in Annex B.

We now turn to the follow-up survey data regarding respondents' use of the tool. Among those who completed the follow-up survey, 74% (N=31) report using the survey at least once between April and September and about one in four reported using the tool three or more times. Table 3 reports the full breakdown of tool use.

**TABLE 3:
ENGAGEMENT WITH TOOL**

TOOL USE	PERCENT OF SAMPLE (N)
Once	29% (N=12)
Twice	21% (N=9)
Three +	24% (N=10)
Did not use	26% (N=11)

Respondents reported a variety of uses for the tool. For example, they used it to develop their beneficiary feedback plans, actions or procedures. One such respondent reported that they used the tool “To develop a Beneficiary Feedback Plan of Action” and another “[To] streamline our feedback mechanism and develop a client satisfaction tool”. Others used it to address specific problems such as “[To] solv[e] miscommunication among the beneficiaries” and “[To] assess effectiveness of particular activities and programs to beneficiaries”. And finally, others used the tool to emphasize the importance of beneficiary feedback with their colleagues. As one respondent reported, s/he used the tool “[To] help other organization members appreciate [the] role of [the] feedback mechanism in service provision”.

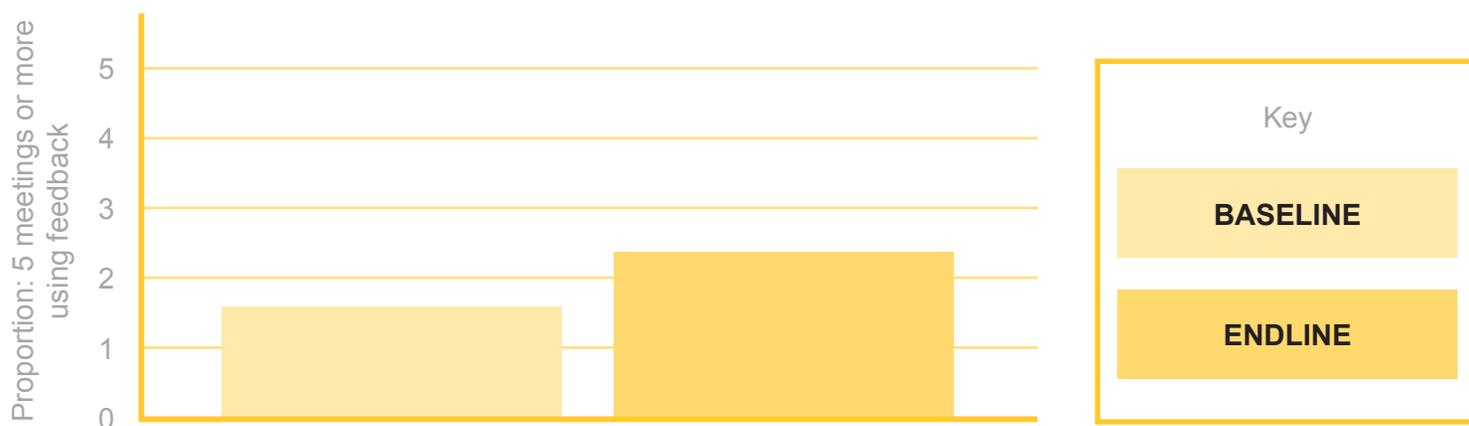
We now turn to the difference-of-means tests to estimate the impact of the tool on reported behavior. It is important to note that given the sample size, it is difficult to detect significant differences. In general, the findings suggest that the tool had an impact on reported behavior. However, while in many instances, the differences between the baseline and follow-up surveys are quite large, they are not statistically significant. Therefore, while we cannot conclude with certainty that the tool caused these changes, given the number of large differences across surveys, we are confident that a future scale-up with more organizations would in fact reveal significant effects. This small-scale intervention provides evidence that a (light touch) tool, like the one introduced in this study, could have potentially important impacts on feedback utilization. As a reminder, we are interested in changes in the following:

- Emphasis the organization places on beneficiary feedback
- Individual ability to effectively use feedback
- Number of meetings that discuss/engage with feedback the effect of feedback on the changes to NGO implementation and programming
- The effect of feedback on the changes to NGO implementation and programming

First, let us consider the frequency with which organizations engage with feedback in team meetings. To measure the number of meetings that discuss/engage with feedback, we asked the following question in both surveys: “How many meetings took place in your organization in the last 2 months in which feedback data were used or discussed?”

Figure 2, reports the proportion of meetings from the baseline and follow-up surveys in which feedback was used. In the baseline survey only about 15% reported that more than five meetings took place in the last month in which feedback data were used or discussed. However, in the follow-up survey about 24% reported discussing feedback in more than five meetings within the last two months, which indicates an increase of 9 percentage points after the introduction of the tool. Given our panel survey design, we expect that any differences we observe are due to the tool. While confounding variables could explain some of the differences between the baseline and follow-up survey, we are confident that observable differences are at least in part due to the tool given that organizational factors are held constant and we know of no training or drastic changes in refugee flows or operations that took place between April and August 2017 that could have influenced the use of feedback. We expect that a scaled-up study could demonstrate significant changes given the substantive changes resulting from our current design.

**FIGURE 2:
PROPORTIONS OF RESPONDENTS DISCUSSING FEEDBACK IN 5 OR MORE MEETINGS**

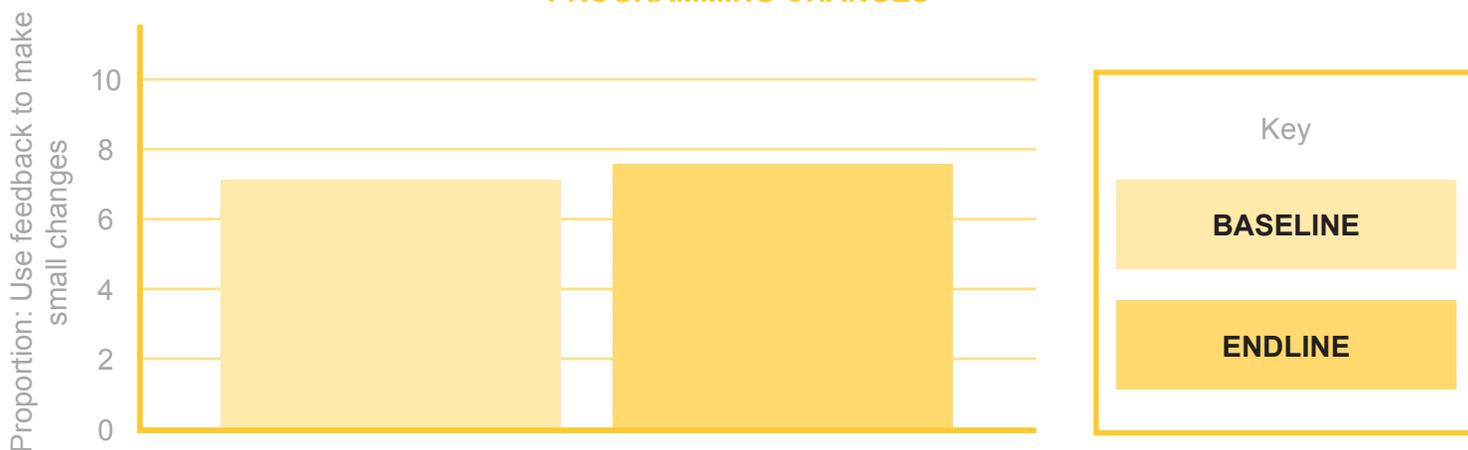


To measure the effect of feedback on the changes to NGO implementation and programming, we asked the following question in both surveys: “How often in the last 2 months have you personally used beneficiary feedback to make SMALL CHANGES to implementation, code of conduct standards, etc.”

Figure 3 reports the proportion of respondents who report using feedback to make changes to programming in the baseline and follow-up surveys. In the baseline, 69% reported that they used beneficiary feedback to make small changes to implementation, code of standards, etc., which suggests that feedback is quite frequently used in this manner. However, we see a stark increase after the tool is introduced: in the follow-up survey, 77% reported making such changes. Once again, this is quite substantial: a fairly basic tool that helps reduce the cognitive burdens associated with feedback leads to an 8 percentage point increase in the probability that NGO staff will use feedback to make changes to programming. While this difference is not statistically significant, we once again expect that a scale-up would reveal statistically significant effects.

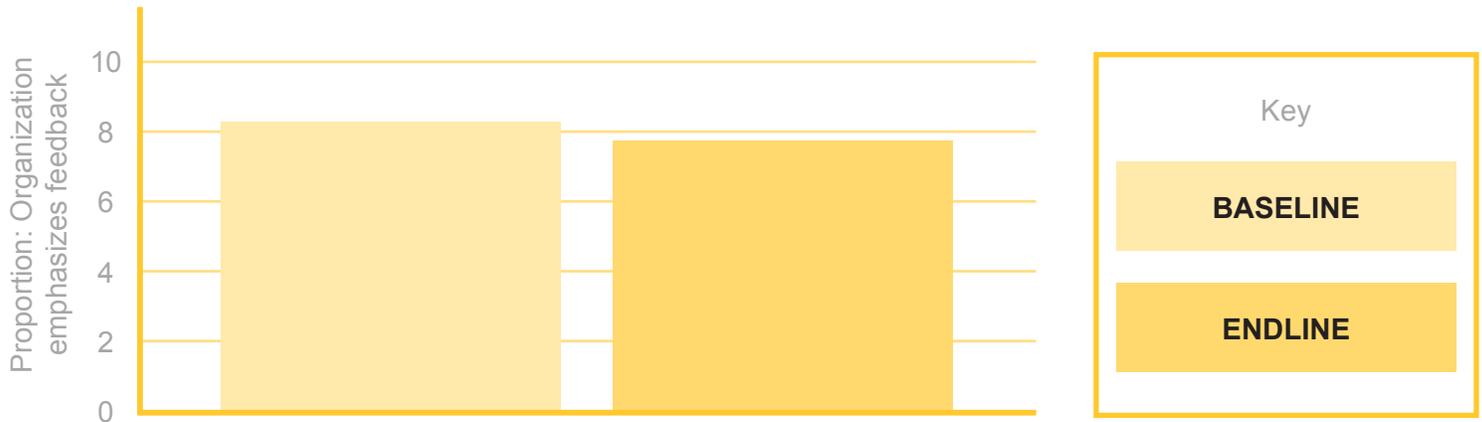
It is important to note that we find no substantive differences across the two surveys for the question: “How often in the last 2 months have you personally used beneficiary feedback to make LARGE CHANGES to program design?” The null results with regards to this question illustrate that the tool had no effect on such large changes. This is to be expected given that, as discussed above, such changes are likely outside of the realm of what these organizations, and moreover the individual respondent, can do given that large changes usually require resources and approval of donors - the two most important challenges to the use of feedback.

**FIGURE 3:
PROPORTIONS OF RESPONDENTS REPORTING USE OF FEEDBACK TO MAKE SMALL
PROGRAMMING CHANGES**



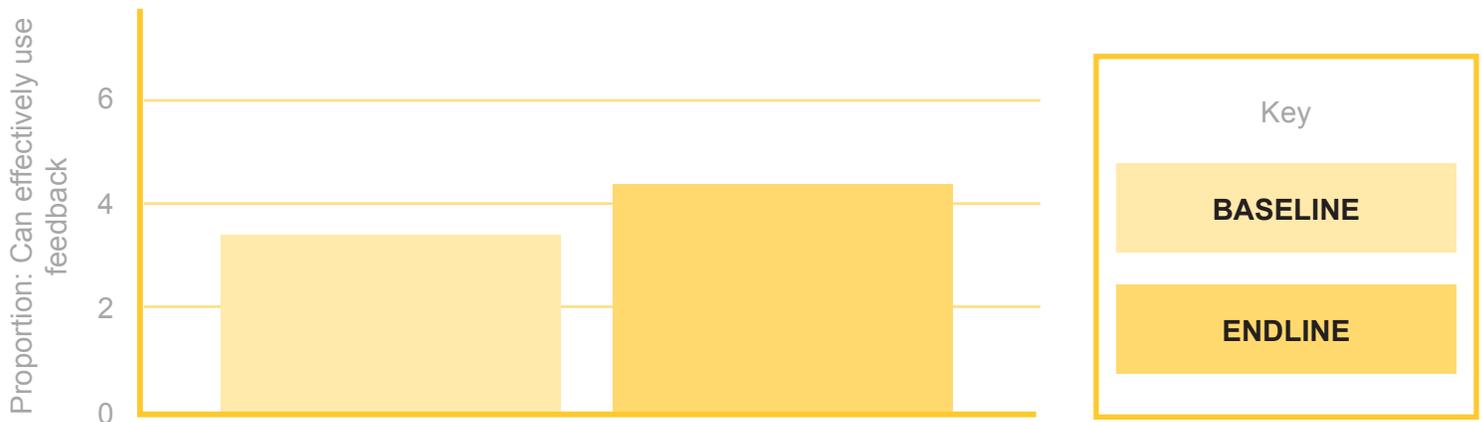
In regards to the remaining outcomes, we find no large substantive or statistically significant differences. However, we briefly present these results in Figures 4 through 6. To measure the emphasis the organization places on beneficiary feedback, we asked the following question in both surveys: “Do you feel that your organization puts enough emphasis on the use of beneficiary feedback?” For this outcome, there is a slight decrease after exposure to the tool. Given the workshop and tool’s emphasis on feedback, it is possible that some respondents began to view their organization’s emphasis as insufficient after exposure to the new information from our workshop, even if organizational emphasis on feedback had not actually changed. This illustrates the importance of treating entire organizations rather than just one or two staff members.

**FIGURE 4:
PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL EMPHASIS ON FEEDBACK**



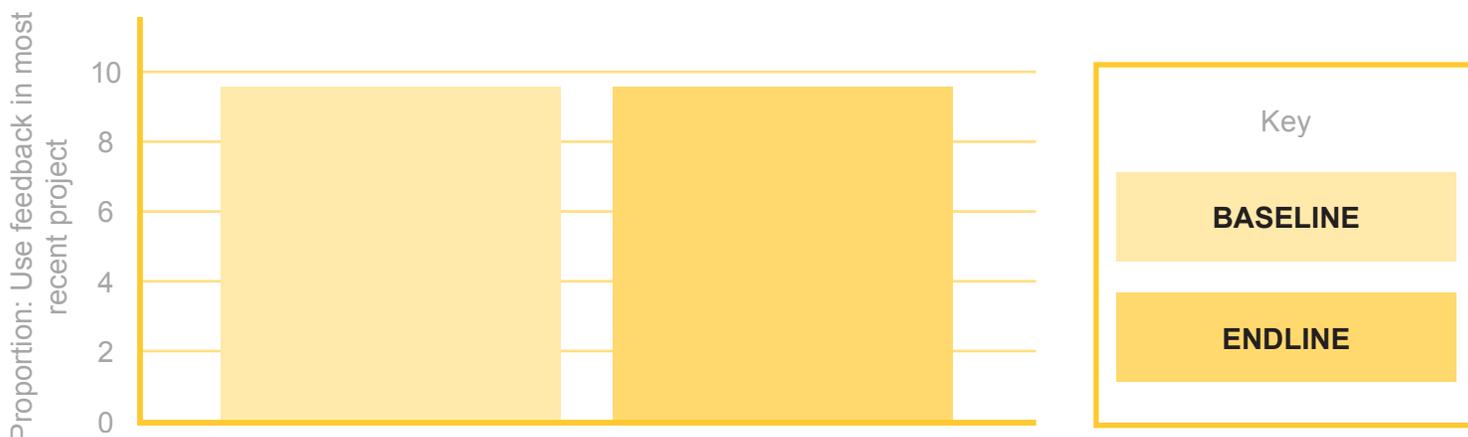
To measure individual ability to effectively use beneficiary feedback, we asked the following question in both surveys: “Do you feel that you are personally able to effectively use feedback and address the beneficiaries’ comments/complaints?” While we do see the expected increase in the ability to use feedback, this effect is not particularly large (about a 3% increase) nor is it statistically significant.

**FIGURE 5:
REPORTED PERSONAL CAPACITY TO EFFECTIVELY USE FEEDBACK**



To measure the frequency of feedback use, we asked the following question in both surveys: “In your most recent project, was formal feedback used in the planning or execution of the project?” By formal feedback we mean feedback that was received by the organization and documented in some way.” In both surveys, 98% of respondents reported using feedback.

**FIGURE 6:
REPORTED USE OF FEEDBACK IN MOST RECENT PROJECT**



KEY OBSERVATIONS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH

After both rounds of the action research, CDA drafted an “Observation and Options” report for each participating agency. These documents were reviewed, revised and approved by representatives from each agency. These reports provide bespoke support for addressing the specific needs of a given organization (and are available in Annex C). While organizations vary in many respects, there are several observations that were relatively consistent across them. This section outlines these general observations.

The three INGOs providing services in the West Nile Region in response to the South Sudanese crisis were in very similar phases of establishing their feedback mechanism and utilizing the data in their decision-making practices. These agencies have been operating in Uganda for a long time and have organizational standards at the international level and internal priorities that are focused on accountability to communities. Notably, however, these organizations were in a relatively nascent stage of establishing the feedback systems in their West Nile programming and mainstreaming those practices across the organization.

- ▣ We documented effective utilization practices at all six agencies. However, these changes related mostly to the “what” (what services we deliver) of programs as opposed to the “how” (how we deliver those services). For example, many staff discussed how changes based on beneficiary feedback often have more to do with where latrines are being built or the type of supplies being distributed, rather than how the organization operates, its staff behave or if its overall mission, mandate and the content of its services/programs align with the needs of those it is serving.
- ▣ Accounting for the small sample size of the action research, the type of organization (international or national) did not seem to have an impact on whether the organization had effective feedback utilization practices. In fact, some of the strongest examples of effective feedback utilization practices were observed at a Ugandan NGO.

Importance of Internal Systems - There seemed to be a connection between consistent internal processes that were well understood by all “users” (staff, volunteers and beneficiaries) and the organization’s ability to effectively use feedback data. One organization’s strong feedback utilization practices relates to several institutional policies (among other factors) including: the mainstreaming of feedback across the organization through trainings for staff and volunteers and the presence of usable, standard operating procedures and policies relating to feedback utilization. Examples of these standard operating procedures include: compliments and complaints management, utilizing the suggestion box system, communication with community members and addressing sensitive feedback. These procedures outline the person or team responsible for handling certain information and the processes in place for sharing and responding to feedback.

Resourcing BFM - All agencies noted that they were facing increasing pressure by donors, international headquarters and shifting agency priorities to focus on effective feedback practices. However, increased resources or technical support has not accompanied the increased interest in effective feedback mechanisms and feedback utilization practices. Every agency discussed gaps in effective practice that directly relate to the lack of adequate resources for their feedback mechanism, which includes the hiring and/or training of staff so they have the appropriate capacities and skills to manage feedback data and present it to decision-makers for effective use.

Internal Learning and Reflection – Several organizations have strong feedback practices at the field level (either due to the design of a specific project or based on an individual staff member’s interest in feedback) that are not used at the regional or national office. Limited time to reflect and share lessons (positive and negative) across the agency means that good practices are overlooked and often dependent on the interest and capabilities of the staff leading those initiatives.

External / Peer Learning – Sharing effective feedback practices among organizations is a notable area of growth for the sector in Uganda. This could be useful for organizations working in the same region or with the same beneficiary population. A joint BFM between agencies (including the Office of the Prime Minister and UNHCR) was raised as an option for enhancing practice. In addition, allocating time to learning across agencies through a working group could be a useful step.

Leadership – Prioritization of feedback by senior management was widely acknowledged as a significant factor that enables agencies to effectively utilize feedback. Leadership buy-in can help to better resource the agency’s feedback mechanism and often encourages staff to undertake innovative and flexible approaches to collecting, analyzing, using and responding to feedback. Furthermore, instituting a culture where leaders demand to see beneficiary feedback regularly can incentivize staff to share and discuss feedback data on a consistent basis. Creating such an environment can increase the frequency with which staff collect, use and respond to beneficiary feedback. We did not see this type of buy-in across all agencies and in some cases, there was a single staff member championing effective feedback practices across the agency.

Staff working with the feedback mechanism consistently raised challenges in several technical areas:

Responding to negative feedback – Negative feedback refers to 1) when staff have to provide an unsatisfactory response to beneficiary feedback and 2) when staff receive negative feedback about the organization, staff, programs etc. Staff from all agencies described a lack of tools or resources to address feedback of this kind. On the one hand, some staff explained that it is difficult to share negative feedback within the organization. On the other hand, staff noted that they are not appropriately equipped to respond to this feedback, so they ignore or forget about it altogether. Gaps in responding to negative feedback can create challenges between organizations and their local communities as it can decrease trust, security and the ability to deliver the contextually appropriate services.

- **Addressing Type II feedback** – Feedback that falls outside of the organization’s mandate (Type II) is the most frequently received type of feedback. Yet, staff felt helpless when dealing with this feedback because it requires a response from senior leadership or another agency and external referral systems are limited.

- **Internal Systems to Manage Feedback** – All six organizations indicated that the lack of a consolidated feedback registry hindered their ability to utilize feedback effectively. Staff feel that they did not have a common platform for processing and tracking feedback so it could be reviewed, analyzed and shared at different levels of the organization. A strong feedback registry also requires staff with the appropriate skills to input, categorize, analyze and present data to decision-makers. Commonly, feedback data is not presented in a way in which leaders can use it quickly to make decisions. A key lesson from CDA’s other learning and advisory work on effective feedback practices demonstrates that when making decisions from feedback it is critical for staff to understand what information should be presented to whom and in what format so decisions can be made quickly and thoughtfully.

- **Consultative Development of Feedback Channels** – It goes without saying that emergency response requires the immediate distribution of goods and services in order to save lives. However, the West Nile response is over three years old and the urban refugee issues in Kampala have been ongoing for decades. Broadly, a gap in organizational practice for developing a useful and effective set of feedback and response channels relates to the lack of consultation with beneficiaries about their preferences. Some staff noted that the rapid nature of the response is to blame for this gap. However, all six organizations could benefit from consulting beneficiaries before establishing new feedback channels and processes and to review existing practice.

POST-RESULTS DISSEMINATION AND LEARNING



IRC Deputy Director of Programs at the Learning Event in Kampala, Uganda. November 21, 2017

After all rounds of the research were completed, the IRC hosted a learning event in Kampala on November 21, 2017. The objective of the event was to reassemble the project participants, stakeholders and supporting parties in order to share project results and to hear about the experiences and insights gained by participants during the action research. The aim was also to discuss and reflect together on what we have learned collectively as well to explore prospects for future research and collaboration. The project team regarded this as an important step in culminating the project by ‘closing the loop’ with the study participants themselves. Representatives from 28 of the original participating organizations attended the event. Delegates from the PRM/State Department Office in Uganda, the Office of the Prime Minister, UNHCR Uganda and the Uganda National NGO Forum were also in attendance.

During the learning event, the IRC provided an overview of the project and its implementation to date as well as a review of the motivation and tools shared during the workshop in April 2017. We shared a summary of the baseline results and presented the main findings from the analysis for changes between the baseline and follow-up surveys. In addition to a discussion of the main results and possible explanations for why we may (or may not) have observed the findings we expected, the event also provided the opportunity for representatives from the agencies that participated in the action research to directly share their experiences and lessons in their own words. This gave other project participants, who were not a part of the action research component, an opportunity to ask questions, compare notes and request the sharing of tools and support. CDA had also prepared a key observations summary document that was shared with all participants.

The event culminated in a discussion of what participants would like to see as next steps in the area of use of beneficiary feedback. Responses included requests for further research: conducting a follow-up survey in 3-6 months to examine the rate and duration of change, examining the effectiveness of specific feedback modalities, focusing on handling sensitive feedback and extending the action research to more organizations. Participants also indicated a strong desire for further in-country collaboration, support and learning, especially across NGOs, the Office of the Prime Minister and UNHCR in the West Nile region.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Representative of the Commissioner of M&E, Office the Prime Minister (OPM) Uganda discussing study results

One of the most important takeaways from this study is that it is feasible to support individuals and organizations to improve the use of feedback, even within a short timeframe. Even with a light touch, short-term intervention among a small sample of agencies, we found substantively large reported differences in the use of feedback in meetings and the use of feedback to make small programming changes. This suggests that if we were able to: (i) do multiple workshops that provided more extensive training and encouragement and (ii) use more interactive tools (e.g. online interface or app) that could provide more regular reminders and address other aspects of cognitive burden (e.g. choice overload, having to rely on memory), we could see statistically significant effects in the actual use of feedback as well as potentially in individual-level perception of the capacity to use feedback effectively.

In addition, from our experience implementing this study, we have a number of recommendations on how to scale up and improve research on this topic moving forward.

First, it will be important to **increase the sample size in order to enable more rigorous testing of the tools**. We had expected to do a full RCT with treatment and control groups, but attendance at the baseline workshop was half of what we had anticipated. This outcome speaks to the importance of greater encouragement whether financial or prestige-based (e.g. partner organizations that can induce participation). Given the relatively small sample, we resorted to doing only a pre-post analysis. While this has taught us much in terms of the effect of the tool on feedback usage, an RCT allows us to more convincingly conclude that the tool, rather than intervening and unobserved events between baseline and follow-up surveys, drives the results.

During the post-results discussion, study participants also pointed to the timing of the workshop – during the later stages of the emergency response to the influx of South Sudanese refugees sparked by violence in 2016. Understandably, responding to the crisis is the first mandate of these agencies and the project team considers itself particularly fortunate to have engaged with over 50 agencies during this period. Many participants believed that now that organizations have had a chance to settle into more stable programming and response, it would be **worth repeating the study**. They anticipate a higher number of participant agencies, more favorable conditions and opportunities for engagement, learning and networking as well as larger effects of the tool on feedback usage. They also believed that **allowing more time between the introduction of the tool and the follow-up** survey could lead to greater adoption and potentially more significant changes.

Second, it may be important to **engage entire organizations in the intervention in order to see more extensive effects**. An organization-wide approach would allow staff at different levels to support each other in the use of the tool and thus increase its use and, by extension, its impact on the organization. Involving senior decision-makers, program managers and front-line staff may also increase accountability for the use of feedback. In general, we expect that if a critical mass of each organization's staff can engage with the tool that it will have an even stronger impact.

Third, it may be interesting to **engage donors on the use of feedback and share the tools with actual data from various organizations with them**. If we could expose donors to the rigors of processing and addressing beneficiary feedback, then we could potentially overcome, at least in part, the donor flexibility challenge. This may then allow the tool to have an impact on supporting the broader institutional environment that is needed in order to more consistently use beneficiary feedback in decision-making.

Fourth, **a more intensive treatment could have a stronger impact**. We could further develop a variety of user-friendly tools that address other cognitive barriers such as choice overload and reliance on memory. Hosting several workshops would also allow greater emphasis on feedback, more effective training of the tool and would encourage greater use of the tool. Such a partnership between the organizations and the project team could result in greater and potentially more sustained impacts (i.e. longer lasting behavioral change at the organizational level that leads to permanent changes in the ways the organizations uses feedback). Also, **more systematic action research with a larger set of NGOs could support organization-wide changes in behavior**. Repeatedly, both participants who took part in the action research and those who did not requested further and more extensive coaching support. We also recommend categorizing and assessing the types of organizational changes that result from varying levels of coaching support. This type of analysis could help donors and NGOs to determine the best ways to invest their time and resources to increase feedback utilization.

Requests for additional accompaniment support point to the mismatch between staff capacity and the increasing emphasis on beneficiary feedback mechanisms by agencies and donors alike. In Uganda, like several other countries in which IRC and CDA have conducted case studies, **there is a critical need to increase the capacity of staff engaged in feedback collection and utilization**. This can be achieved by offering trainings on data analysis and presentation, listening skills, body language and customer service skills as well as how to respond to negative information. Trainings could be provided by outside experts; however, it is critical to identify and support local trainers who can support agencies in country.

Trainings however should be coupled with increased resourcing of feedback mechanisms. Understanding the cost of establishing and running a complete feedback mechanism can be discerned by conducting a budget analysis of the basic line-items and costs associated with the mechanism and its related processes. For example, an organizational budget analysis may include the costs associated with: consultation processes with communities; relevant staff salaries and time allocated to design/set-up of the feedback mechanisms, implementation and monitoring; staff development budget including skills training and refresher trainings; and community volunteer skill training budget. Often the upfront costs of developing a feedback mechanism are high; however, once a system is in place it can reduce a number of other costs incurred by the agency – financial, reputational etc. Including budgets that can realistically support feedback mechanisms should be a priority for organizations and donors alike.

In addition, many organizations lacked reliable and institution-wide systems for managing feedback data. When agencies have consistent processes that are understood by all users, it can increase the confidence of utilizing feedback data by decision-makers. Furthermore, when agencies are able to see trends in feedback data, they can supplement it with additional data points, if necessary, to validate and triangulate the information. Many agencies that participated in the action research, however, did not know how feedback data traveled through their organization. **Undertaking an institutional mapping of how information is shared will improve understanding of how feedback data moves between different units of the organization and can illuminate the strengths and gaps in the system.** In some cases, this mapping may also help to gain buy-in from staff by ensuring that they see how they are already collecting and using feedback and how feedback helps them do their jobs more easily and effectively.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the factors that enable the use of beneficiary feedback in programmatic decision-making among refugee and IDP-serving NGOs in urban and rural Uganda. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the project revealed that it is possible to improve feedback utilization even with light-touch treatments within a short period of time. NGO representatives exposed to decision-making tools reported substantive changes in the use of feedback in meetings and in making small changes in program implementation. Due to small sample size, the results cannot be completely attributed to exposure to the tools. Therefore, we suspect that with a larger sample and a more intensive treatment (more extensive engagement with tools and coaching support), the analytical methods would be more rigorous and the impacts are more likely to be larger and statistically significant.

Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that increased emphasis on the use of feedback needs to be accompanied by increased support not merely to collect data but to process, interpret, use and communicate it effectively. This can be done at both individual and organizational levels. Behavioral science-informed tools that aid planning, decision-making and following through on commitments can address the very human cognitive barriers that block the use of feedback by individuals and groups despite the best of intentions. Coaching support is needed to (i) map and clarify organizational information flows; (ii) establish common platforms, clear internal systems and standard operating procedures and (iii) improve listening, data presentation and customer service skills. Incentivizing senior management to request and use feedback and to create the spaces for reflection, learning and adjustment is extremely important. These incentives, capacities and systems also require increased financial resources and a greater degree of flexibility on the part of donors. We hope these findings and recommendations can inform the strategies and policies of organizations like PRM as they continue to invest in accountability to affected populations.

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FEEDBACK TO ACTION: Strategies to improve the use of feedback in programmatic decision-making.

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