

LISTEN LEARN ACT – End of project summary

Full project title: Enhanced Response Capacity through Evidence-Based Quality and Accountability Standards and Innovative Inclusion of Affected Populations (September 2015 – July 2017)

(most activities finished by May)

HIP/Decision Reference: ECHO/ERC/BUD/2015/91000

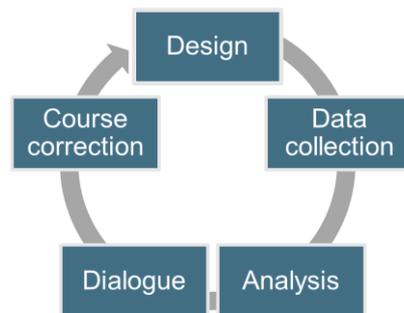
DanChurchAid, Save the Children and Ground Truth Solutions (Keystone Accountability) piloted an exciting global quality and accountability project in four countries (Mali, Nepal, the Syria response in Lebanon and the South Sudan refugee response in Gambella, Ethiopia). With a serious commitment to quality and accountability for disaster-affected populations, and with ECHO's support, *Listen Learn Act* sought to reinforce the roll-out of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS).

This project maintained a close partnership with the Sphere Project and the CHS Alliance while reaching out to the broader humanitarian community through established coordination and policy mechanisms at field and global levels.

This summary contains a brief overview of what Listen Learn Act was about – it is important that readers refer to the [two external learning reports prepared by Andy Featherstone for a more detailed analysis of the achievements, challenges and recommendations emerging from the project](#)¹.

What's it all about?

Listen Learn Act brought Ground Truth Solutions' Constituent Voice™ method, modelled on customer satisfaction surveys, to asking affected people questions developed around the CHS commitments. Survey results were analysed and discussed with communities *and* NGOs to “course correct” based on the feedback. Re-surveys (two) allowed discussion, learning among participating humanitarian staff, and the ability to monitor changes in feedback.



The specific objective: Enhanced response capacity through the development, use and integration of an innovative and practical methodology for monitoring accountability to beneficiaries; training and awareness raising of humanitarian actors; and global dissemination of findings.

¹ **Checking the Heartbeat of Humanitarian Assistance**, and **Placing Accountability at the Heart of Humanitarian Assistance** found at: <https://www.danchurchaid.org/about-us/quality-assurance/the-listen-learn-act-project>

The action's results:

- 1) Participating humanitarian organisations integrate beneficiary feedback systems to test and inform the roll out of Core Humanitarian Standards across different contexts and address shortcomings in their performance;
- 2) Targeted humanitarian organisations improve accountability and beneficiary feedback systems through blended learning approaches and share experiences through a community of practice; and
- 3) Increased access and awareness of Core Humanitarian Standards and beneficiary feedback systems through dissemination of outputs and lessons learned from the action.

Some anticipated practical benefits for participating organisations were:

- Better quality data from affected people on performance and accountability, as well as an accompanied process to integrate that data and feedback into programming decisions.
- Improved skills, knowledge, awareness and practices of effective community engagement, potentially improving needs assessments and monitoring in responses to future crises.
- Improved accountability and beneficiary feedback systems through blended learning approaches and share experiences through a community of practice.

Result 1: Participants - Four organisations were selected to participate in each of the four countries, through an opt-in process (by submitting of expressions of interest). Each organisation started from a different “place” in terms of accountability and feedback mechanisms, and organisation-level (and country-level) inclusion of the CHS. Many felt they gained helpful insights into their “accountability performance” and are considering adopting elements of the approach either at the project or the country-programme level. Asking perceptual information – especially with a focus on the CHS; presenting data visually and simply, and closing the feedback loop are important practices that have been mentioned as interesting and potentially implementable going forward.

In **Ethiopia**, the four participants were DCA, Save the Children, International Medical Corps, and Plan International in Ethiopia. In **Lebanon**, Association Najdeh, Care International, Kayany Foundation and Save the Children took part. In **Mali**, participants were Care International, Mercy Corps, Norwegian Church Aid and their partner TASSAGHT and Save the Children, and in **Nepal**, ECO-Nepal and DCA, Plan International and Save the Children with their partner Shree Swarna Integrated Community Development Centre (SSICDC), took part.

Initially, each NGO worked with Ground Truth Solutions in short workshops to introduce the methodology and to **design** a feedback survey based on the CHS commitments. Questions were field-tested, and one learning point suggested by participants was that more time might have gone into contextualising these.

Professional local data enumerators were hired to **survey** the affected communities according to a schedule that shifted during the action’s timeframe, to accommodate the realities of ongoing responsibilities in participating staff’s workloads. Survey results were compiled in reports emphasising visual information, presenting participating organisations with real-time feedback from beneficiaries.

Survey results² for the participating NGOs presented areas where beneficiaries think things are going well and where there are opportunities to improve programmes and NGO processes. Themes included met and unmet needs, timeliness of assistance, degrees to which affected people felt

² A summary of all the questions asked in all pilot countries is available on the Listen Learn Act project site at www.actlearn.org (create a log-in, search for the LLA project)

involved in decisions and processed, staff attitudes, information gaps, communication channels, understanding and performance of complaints mechanisms, feelings of safety or concern and levels of optimism about the future. Answers to questions were rated on Likert five-point scales, and scores went both up and down between rounds – the process of dialogue revealed reasons in variation, for example positive changes in response to corrective actions and negative changes as communities reacted to external / contextual changes (projects closing, policy or infrastructure barriers).

Guidance on **data analysis** and **course correction** was provided by Ground Truth Solutions over Skype. As part of data analysis, **visualisation of results** emphasised simple graphic representation which received positive feedback:

“...Reports made the issues and concerns clearer...there were things that staff felt might be a concern, but based on the data they could seek more details and better focus a response.”

In between the data analysis and course correction steps, organisations were encouraged to discuss survey results in **internal and external dialogues**, seeking to deepen understanding of the issues, bring affected people’s voices into potential corrective actions and document the process in a “management response” template. Feedback from several participating organisations indicated that the expectations in the dialogue step were not fully clear to them, and so this step was fulfilled to varying degrees. Some organisations went straight from analysis to course correction, without discussing results in communities (ie closing the feedback loop) and bringing people’s voices into decision-making. High staff turnover during the actions’ timeframe also contributed to this as a challenge. After taking part in the trainings, participants felt they had a better understanding of the complete cycle for subsequent survey rounds. This is a valuable lesson for the consortium members, as the sequencing in the action’s design had assumed that initial country-level inception workshops would be sufficient to explain the method and participants would then be able to contribute their learning and experience to the trainings held after the second round of surveys.

Teams undertook **internal dialogues** through:

- Sharing reports with staff and volunteers – including security managers and others who could contribute to an understanding of why some of the results emerged;
- Discussing the findings in senior management meetings;
- Agreeing potential follow-up actions with management teams who worked with officers and field teams for implementation;
- Doing t-chart analysis in staff meetings;
- Presenting the findings and data through powerpoints in an internal dialogue workshop, discussing the issues, possible reasons behind them and what could be done.

Once teams had developed an internal understanding of why communities had responded as they did, and had discussed some of the potential remedies, **external dialogues** were undertaken to share and discuss the findings with communities. These generally took the form of focus group discussions (FGDs):

- Choose the types of people for the focus groups (men, women, different age groups, or combined groups);
- Informing communities in advance on the purpose of the meeting and the time;
- Prepare a summary of the results to be discussed with communities;
- Ensure the team responsible for the meeting is prepared;
- Create modified t-charts - *document the issues, reasons and suggested/required actions.*

During these meetings, staff also gathered information on ongoing needs, contributing to needs assessments for future programming. This involved managing peoples' expectations and ensuring people knew NGOs were listening to them.

After the external dialogue meetings, some participating NGOs reported that beneficiaries expressed their satisfaction with the process: *"They know they are valued and that we are concerned about their involvement."*

A tip from one NGOs that held external dialogues is the importance of proactively reaching out to marginalised groups especially illiterate people, who are part of many of the communities we work in and who are not able to provide feedback in suggestion boxes, for example. In these types of cases, other mechanisms including the survey process from Listen Learn Act are essential.

Another NGO mentioned that they would like to include other key stakeholders in the survey sampling in the future, to widen the range of opinions, for example from Government and non-beneficiaries. Some participants took steps to share survey results more widely: in inter-agency and coordination meetings; with camp-level committees and with other NGOs.

The dialogue process helped identify course corrections, to improve NGO accountability and performance. The types of adjustments that LLA participating NGOs made include: action plans to address issues, adding new inputs (toys, educational materials), changing project focus (curriculum additions in vocational training), improving relations between staff and beneficiaries (joint sessions with beneficiaries, more coordination with beneficiaries, repeat trainings on child protection, gender). There were also cases where there were differences in community perceptions between project sites, which led NGOs to try to understand why. Processes were made more transparent in cases where there were perceptions of unfairness, and several participants received feedback that led them to improve and update their complaints mechanisms and share more information, or sharing information differently, about them. Some NGOs were surprised by the gaps that the survey results revealed, where communities felt they had a lack of information about well-established services or how to make complaints, or they did not feel included in decisions. Solutions were often achieved in a few easy and simple steps. Advocacy was also an important response to issues that NGOs could not "fix" on their own.

As the LLA implementing consortium, we also learned some lessons that can be applied to future organisational change processes. NGOs suggested we could have focussed more on initial management buy-in, to ensure wider involvement of teams during the pilot process. As mentioned above, running trainings *before* starting the field-testing of the survey tool may have contributed to a better understanding from country-level staff and management of the benefit of all team members engaging in the pilot: *"Because it's not a totally new process, but it helps us ensure the quality of our work, and introduce an approach to improving how we see things – so we could have benefitted more."* An alternative way to reinforce the key points, especially around the dialogue phase, would have been for more visits to the pilot countries by the Ground Truth Solutions team (if budget had been allocated).

Reflections from LLA participating NGOs: During the project close-out process, meetings were held with each organisation. Here are some of the things we heard:

- In terms of regular dialogue with our target groups, and making improvements based on feedback, our monitoring system has many areas that can improve after LLA.
- We are now in the 'country programme development process', so this could be an opportunity to really see how our systems are evolving to include the CHS...we need to work on quality and accountability 'systems'.

- The reports were very useful, in terms of substance, in terms of what they brought up from the ground. It reminded us to work on issues of accountability as well as quality.
- LLA reporting is very practical, you can see the progress easily, and you do not need to spend the day reading a report to understand. It is a new style of communication that is very interesting.
- We are in the process of country programme development and so we're designing a proper M&E framework that incorporates beneficiary feedback, we can improve monitoring formats, and make it all more people-centred.
- With our new management staff, it is a priority to incorporate accountability into job descriptions – we need to reflect what is expected of each staff (in their performance objectives), especially those working with communities.
- MEAL teams are usually seen as the “police”, but it is getting better, we are closer to working as one team – but before you mainstream learning you have to learn yourself, before you mainstreaming accountability, you have to own it first.
- LLA has been perceived as a MEAL process, so we need to get the programme teams and management included as well. It is also important to make it clear that it is not a control mechanism. The aim is to improve our work and not to control staff: it is important to explain the purpose well before we use this method in the future.
- This is the new and unique thing about the LLA approach – it creates the link between beneficiaries and staff, it shows the gaps and you can then discuss the way forward.
- By presenting this outside the organisation to other stakeholders, people will hold us accountable. We must question ourselves, if we just produce more documents, it is only when we start discussing results that people start to know what you do and hold you accountable
- We already had a decent accountability mechanism before LLA, we had two-way communication channels. But, we weren't doing it systematically, in terms of going to communities. That was missing, we lacked a proactive approach: we don't always have to wait for people to come to us.

How LLA participants are thinking about systematising this approach to quality and accountability:

- Plans to integrate aspects of the LLA project in standard MEAL processes; MEAL want to include these questions in their regular monitoring.
- Our thinking is to institutionalise this approach. We would like to increase the frequency of data collection - we have pre- and post-distribution monitoring, monthly or weekly, so we can draft simple questions and make these 9 commitments part of the monitoring process.
- We want to have regular feedback from communities on accountability, we need to increase the frequency of data being collected, and we have to be much faster at responses.
- We had an organisational workshop on another topic, but we also presented LLA and accountability. Many of our colleagues and even our senior management team felt the approach was helpful. We now have an action plan on how the approach can be embedded into our emergency programmes.
- We can do this following three potential models, we will most likely try them all: the internship model (train interns at field level to do regular data collection); use existing MEAL budget to hire local data collectors; hire in 5-10 beneficiaries to do the data collection and get them to facilitate the dialogue at the community level.

Result 2: The project took a blended-learning approach to capacity building activities, seeking to ensure sustainability and a larger outreach. Humanitarians that were not involved in the survey component were able to take part in training and learn about the process, build relationships and create possibilities for experience sharing. **Two-day trainings were held** in each country, and included NGO staff participating in the survey pilots.

Frontline humanitarian trainees

Country	# from INGOs	# from LNGOs	# other	Total # trainees
Ethiopia	19		3	22
Kenya*	23	14	2	39
Lebanon	29	8	6	43
Mali	37	12	2	51
Nepal	41	15	1	57
Total	149	49	14	212

* One INGO participant came from South Sudan

We also created an **eLearning course** that takes learners through a fictional, scenario-based instructional experience to apply the Ground Truth Constituent Voice™ method to programme quality and accountability, focussing on the CHS commitments and Sphere. The free “Listen Learn Act training” is available in English, French and Arabic and can be accessed through DCA’s online learning platform www.actlearn.org.

Result 3: A major focus for the project was wider dissemination and learning about quality and accountability. Project staff participated in panels at the CHS Alliance learning event (Geneva, November 2016) and an IASC Task Team Brown Bag Lunch “*What does it take to be accountable in humanitarian assistance?*” The project was also part of the Agora at the 31st ALNAP Annual event (Sweden, February 2017) and contributed input to the Grand Bargain Participation workstream, the Outcome Harvesting component for the next ALNAP State of the Humanitarian System report and research for UNICEF to compile good examples of outcome monitoring approaches in humanitarian action.

In addition, and reflecting the relevance of the actions’ attempts to “operationalise the CHS”, Sphere has been closely following the project and we hosted Sphere Handbook revision consultation meetings (March-June 2017) focussed on the CHS/Core Standards chapters as well as monitoring guidance. The meetings drew together participants from Results 1 and 2, as well as the wider humanitarian community, to discuss country-level practical experiences of “putting people at the centre of humanitarian responses”, and outcomes of the discussions were shared with the Sphere Handbook re-writing team.