

Evaluation of the Community Contact Centres

Executive Summary

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This summary presents the findings of an evaluation of the Community Contact Centres (CCCs) as part of the ICRC's architecture for AAP, with a focus on three country cases: Iraq, Somalia and Ukraine. Between May and October 2023, the evaluation team conducted key informant interviews and desk research to identify strengths and weaknesses of the current approach as well as draw out lessons to inform the future roll-out of CCCs across delegations.

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Background

The ICRC's Community Contact Centre (CCC) project was launched in 2018 with the aim to professionalize the way the ICRC manages feedback from people affected by conflicts and other situations of violence. The main part of the project involved the launch of a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tool, with the long-term ambition to enable delegations to independently manage logging, referring, escalating, and following up on calls as well as reporting on the feedback they received. At the time of this evaluation in 2023, 15 ICRC delegations are using CCCs and have registered over 280,000 inquiries.

About this evaluation

While CCCs differ in size and shape across delegations, they are based on a common logic, centered around the notion of accountability to affected people (AAP). The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the CCCs as part of the ICRC's architecture for AAP in order to inform the further roll out of CCCs across delegations. While a technical assessment of the existing feedback solutions is outside the scope of this exercise, the evaluation aims to identify actionable short-term improvements as well as more strategic recommendations to inform the future of CCCs. It is based on key informant interviews and a review of documents from three case-study countries – Ukraine, Somalia and Iraq – as well as global-level analysis. The evaluation team did not consult affected people, i.e., the ultimate intended beneficiaries of any feedback mechanism. Instead, we relied on interviews with ICRC staff members and a small number of external actors to assess the CCCs' merit along the main evaluation questions outlined below.

To what extent do the CCCs contribute to a more accountable response?

ICRC staff interviewed appreciate how the CCCs helped professionalize feedback management in several delegations and that a functioning CCC can support operations directly, for example in terms of verifying beneficiaries or supporting pre-case management.

ICRC users¹ of the CCCs generally also have a positive view of their contribution to accountability, as the 2022 field survey shows. When asked generically about the role of the CCCs in reinforcing ICRC accountability, 90 percent of users said they are either "very helpful" or "helpful."² And indeed, this evaluation finds evidence that the CCCs contribute to some of the principles of a response that is accountable to affected people.

For example, the role of the CCCs in minimizing or mitigating potential negative effects and fraudulent behavior is appreciated by interviewees across the organization. All CCCs covered by this evaluation used referral pathways for sensitive feedback concerning ethics and compliance issues. A key benefit is that affected people have access to a dedicated feedback mechanism, whereas before they often mainly relied on contacts to field officers and therefore had less opportunities to complain about issues relating to these very staff

¹ The term "user" refers to people in a delegation who have access to CCC data and take responsibility for following up on the feedback received. "Operators" are dedicated staff who receive the feedback, typically via phone.

² 2022 field survey, n=254. The survey went out to 1000+ CRM-registered users from 15 operating delegations, covering all types of user profiles. Source: DigiTop CCC: Community Contact Centers. 2022 field survey main findings (PDF).

members. Moreover, going to an ICRC office to complain or raise issues about fraud could entail risks for affected people. The CCCs provide a more discrete alternative.

Moreover, data from the CCCs is being used to inform delegations' understanding of the local context and needs, albeit not consistently and not to its full potential. From a communications and risk management perspective, interviewees appreciated the CCCs' role in monitoring public perception, especially at a time when programs are being downsized. Interviewees also reported several instances where misconceptions about the ICRC's mandate could be detected and subsequently addressed in communication efforts. In general, a better understanding of the context and humanitarian needs in a whole or parts of a population can be a useful by-product of the CCCs and is typically the result of smart analysis of the feedback data they generate. That said, it is important to take the various biases inherent in the data into account and always consider how information about contact channels was disseminated, to whom, and whose perspective is likely missing from the feedback.

Incoming feedback does inform programming in important ways in the three countries we studied. However, this typically results from the initiative of individual staff members rather than a systematic closing of the feedback loop across a whole delegation and it could be more consistent. This evaluation also could not identify a systematic, organization-wide approach or process prescribing how feedback data should be used by delegations. That said, stakeholders in all countries covered could describe cases of how feedback data was used to inform program changes and communication activities. Typically, those examples referred to quite specific pieces of information and specific programming decisions. There was no evidence for feedback data being analyzed and used across countries, for instance, to inform communications at a central level. The desk research confirmed that despite visible improvements in the CCC reports over the past years, feedback analysis for informing operational decisions is still suboptimal.

However, some of the contributions to accountability that are expected by advocates of the CCCs seem unrealistic in light of the practices reviewed for this evaluation. There is little evidence that CCCs lead to more inclusive programming or more meaningful participation in programming decisions by affected communities. CCCs also remain largely insignificant when it comes to coordination and partnerships.

What barriers and success factors can be identified in delegations?

The case studies illustrate some limitations inherent in the CCCs as well as broader organizational challenges affecting the effective operation of CCCs. These become most palpable where the feedback volume and operational demands on delegations are high.

Most importantly, this evaluation shows that the CCCs have not been designed to react comprehensively to the concerns of affected people. Early on in the development and piloting of the CCC project, protection experts at HQ level had voiced serious concerns about its application to protection-related work and about how the CCC project was rolled out. Key stakeholders at the central level continue to have these concerns while the development of parallel solutions has proceeded further. The fact that key stakeholders involved in the early phases of the CCC project have agreed to disagree on the value and

use of the CCCs for protection work and their position vis-à-vis other tools is still a major barrier for effective implementation on the ground.

Another barrier affecting the use and roll-out of CCCs in delegations is the perceived lack of clarity around accountability for the approach at the central level. While preferences differed amongst interviewees, all agreed that accountability for the CCCs should be spelled out more clearly by top management and reflect transversality rather than one particular métier's perspective.

At the country level, it was clear that *how* the CCC is advertised and introduced to affected populations has a strong influence on what it will be used for. In this sense, dissemination can be a success factor or a barrier. For a CCC to add value to the ICRC's operations and to affected communities, it is important that its capacity to respond to feedback is adequate compared to the volume of the feedback it receives. It is also important to have in place contingency plans to navigate extreme changes in the feedback volume or an escalation of the crisis that may affect the CCC's capacity to respond.

Finally, interviewees raised several technical issues that constrain the effectiveness, utility and practice of the CCCs. Most prominently and almost unanimously, Skype is seen as a problematic solution for handling calls. Relatedly, the lack of integration between Skype and the CRM system poses significant challenges. As interviewees stressed frequently, CCCs do not provide a call-center solution. This means the solution available cannot directly manage calls, or be used to make appointments, and thus forces operators to manually check the number of the caller in the CRM to see whether and/or which calls the CCC received from this number before. This results in inefficient and error-prone feedback management practices and could undermine the satisfaction of both callers and operators alike.

What resources are invested in CCCs and what risks do they entail?

The costs for the CCC tool and its maintenance are included in the DigitOps budget at HQ. These costs amount to just over 500,000 CHF annually, of which around 60% are for user fees and licenses; 20% are for maintenance, deployment and enhancements; and 20% for the functional support team. The number of licenses and associated costs has grown over the past years, but there are plans to reduce them in 2024, as many of those licenses are not being actively used. The other main resource requirements in countries, namely for staff costs and office space, are included in delegations' budgets. This evaluation did not have access to budget data from delegations, but our analysis of quantitative feedback data and staffing numbers indicates that costs and cost effectiveness vary substantially across the CCCs. Available data and feedback from interviewees corroborate the impression of an inconsistent staffing practice across the organization. That said, interviewees consulted in the case-study countries did not feel that costs are a significant issue compared to the overall budget of their operations. Recent budget cuts have not changed this perception, particularly in light of the expected increase in information requests among affected people in areas where ICRC programs are being scaled down.

Throughout the evolution CCC project, several risks were highlighted by different parts of the organization. The evidence reviewed for this evaluation suggests that some of the perceived risks have been inflated by incorrect assumptions about the CCCs, while others can be managed, as evidenced by existing good practice.

The most contentious risk concerns the use of the CCCs for protection-related requests or feedback. This evaluation finds that the CRM tool has indeed not been designed to provide a comprehensive or transversal solution and is therefore not well-suited to deal with protection-related concerns. On the other hand, blanket claims that CCCs cannot be used for protection due to the sensitivities involved and the exceptional nature of protection-related work could not be substantiated through evidence collected from the case-study countries. While covering protection-related issues through the CCC in Somalia has not yet taken off, both the CCC in Iraq and the one in Ukraine have successfully managed to define a useful role for the CCC in protection. In both cases, CCC operators have been trained extensively on protection-related issues and are in part supervised by staff members with a protection background. CCC operators enter protection-related information into separate systems, be they Prot6 (a key information management tool for protection) or separate Excel-files. While these adaptations entail significant efforts, they have the distinct advantage of offering a unified communication channel that affected people can use no matter what their concerns are. These findings suggest that there is no binary yes/no answer to whether CCCs are appropriate for handling protection-related issues. Rather, covering protection-related issues through a CCC requires significant investments, adaptations and work arounds and entails specific benefits for affected people using the CCC. The balance between both considerations should be assessed in each context. When doing so, potential risks need to be unpacked, compared to a scenario where there is no CCC, and then managed strategically. Moreover, the current lack of integration between the CCCs and other community-facing solutions, such as IOTPC (a project supporting integrated online tracing and pre-case management for potential protection cases), remains a concern that needs to be addressed.

A second common concern is that CCCs and their heavy reliance on digital and mobile (phone) channels may crowd out “real” face-to-face engagement with affected communities by ICRC staff. For the countries examined, the evaluation could not find any evidence that this is happening, such as offices being less accessible or open to communities after a CCC was introduced. To the contrary, there is some evidence that the CCCs in Iraq and Somalia allow for more face-to-face interaction with communities by field officers and help them focus on the basics of their role. Moreover, affected people sometimes prefer digital communication over face-to-face interactions.

The risk of raising expectations among affected communities by advertising feedback channels even though the ICRC only has limited capacity to manage and/or address the feedback needs to be taken seriously. The balance between feedback volume and the capacity to respond must be strategically managed.

Conclusion

Evidence from delegations that use CCCs relativizes both expectations about what benefits can be expected of the CCCs and concerns over the risks they entail. The way feedback is currently being managed at the ICRC makes a clear contribution to strengthening accountability to affected people; but the CCCs are neither the holy grail for accountability that their strongest advocates seem to suggest, nor do they entail the kind of severe risks that their critics fear. The experiences reviewed for this evaluation paint a more balanced and pragmatic picture. They show that most stakeholders at the delegation level in the country cases we studied agree that CCCs are relevant and can add value. Stronger

disagreements on the topic mostly play out at the central level. That said, the real-world experience with the CCCs in delegations also reveals that CCCs have some design flaws and that CCC operations face organizational challenges that currently limit their effectiveness, especially where feedback volumes and operational demands are very high.

Overall, the evaluation team concludes that the CCCs are making a distinct contribution to accountability – at a limited cost and with manageable risks. That said, efforts to address design flaws and organizational challenges would enable the centers to realize more of their potential and provide a more suitable solution in emergency contexts. The most pressing current constraints of the CCCs include: the disagreement at central level on whether and how to include protection-related concerns; the lack of a technical solution to do so seamlessly; the lack of integration between the call management and data collection components of the CCCs; the lack of integration or interoperability of the CCCs with other community-facing communication solutions; as well as unclear responsibility for the CCCs.

The evaluation team concludes that the ICRC should adjust its expectations vis-à-vis the CCCs to a more realistic and pragmatic level and continue to invest in the approach – e.g., by rolling it out in large operations and remote contexts especially – while addressing its limitations.

Recommendations

To the ICRC Leadership:

- 1. Reduce fragmentation in beneficiary management and communication vis-à-vis communities.** None of the community-facing tools at the disposal of ICRC staff are truly transversal in nature and they are currently not interoperable. Moreover, multiple databases for different métiers exist and multiple solutions continue to be developed and used in parallel. This fragmentation should be addressed if barriers to effective feedback management are to be overcome and the ICRC is to become more people-centered. Where it is not possible or desirable to integrate solutions completely, interoperability should be required from the start.
- 2. Clarify who is responsible for the roll-out of a truly transversal feedback management approach at the ICRC.** Leadership for the CCCs needs to be more explicitly designated and communicated across the organization. It should be placed with an entity that has sufficient clout and is close to operations but ideally has a transversal position that is distinct from implementation and individual métiers.
- 3. Address the concerns raised by protection staff and find a solution that works for all métiers.** Irrespective of who or which unit is dedicated to lead on the roll-out of a transversal feedback management approach, they should be given the authority to develop and/or demand solutions with regard to the integration of protection and the development of other community-facing tools currently under the responsibility of separate units.
- 4. Further develop buy-in for the CCCs.** The roadmap for the new institutional strategy or a comparable plan should specify more firmly what is expected from delegations in terms of feedback management and how many of the ICRC's operations should have a CCC in place by a specific time in the future. This evaluation recommends that all major operations should have a system in place, but the exact number should be agreed upon with the unit taking the lead for further developing the CCCs.

- 5. Keep rolling-out and further integrating the CCC.** In major operations of a critical size, CCCs should (continue to be) rolled-out and further integrated. Existing ones should not be cut prematurely when facing the need to downsize operations but used to maintain an ear on the ground and manage risks as activities are wound down.

To the Unit Responsible for Further Developing the CCCs:

- 6. Capitalize on the strengths of the CCCs and replicate good practices.** Delegations should integrate, equip and enable operators as much as possible so they can find solutions independently and, ideally, right away. The unit responsible should provide clearer guidance on how to ensure feedback uptake and on which structures in delegations can make this more likely. When rolling out a CCC, delegations should manage dissemination strategically and consistently, with the right purpose in mind, and in a way that is balanced with the respective CCC's and delegation's capacity to respond. To enhance the use of feedback data, its analysis should be improved through better guidance and less reliance on automated reporting. Especially during periods with lower call volumes, CCCs in delegations should support operational activities. On the other hand, contingency plans should be developed to prepare for spikes in feedback volume and the extreme case of a delegation being temporarily unable to manage feedback due the direct effects of a crisis.
- 7. Address remaining technical issues.** An effective contact center requires full integration of the call management component and the data collection component. The current CCC setup does not achieve this, which is taking a toll on the user experience of both operators and affected people using the system. A more integrated solution would also allow for better analysis of feedback data.
- 8. Propose a common definition of success and manage CCCs to achieve it.** In line with lessons from outside the humanitarian sector, definitions of success should go beyond quantitative metrics and acknowledge that call volume is not a useful metric to determine the value of a contact center. It is important to treat CCC performance not as something distinct from the larger organization, but to always refer it back to the institution's and delegations' strategic objectives. The evaluation proposes specific metrics to be used.
- 9. Explore and use the potential of automation.** It is recommended to further experiment with simple automation and interactive voice recording for standard information requests and to monitor their effects in each context. Recorded messages could also be a way to make basic information available in additional languages. Moreover, advances in large language model technology should be closely monitored and explored for their potential to optimize feedback management both in the backend and for affected communities via text-based feedback channels and chatbots.