# FINAL EVALUATION

# SUMMARY FINDINGS REPORT

## Community Engagement and Accountability

### Ukraine and Impacted Countries Emergency Appeal

February 2026

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## Background

The Ukraine and Impacted Countries Emergency Appeal (UIC EA) was launched in February 2022 in response to the humanitarian consequences of the escalation of the Russia Ukraine international armed conflict. With over CHF 529 million raised, the appeal supported operations across Ukraine and 17 impacted countries[1], making it one of the largest and most complex responses in IFRC's history.

Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) was identified from the outset as critical to the quality, relevance and acceptance of the response. CEA surge were deployed at country and regional level to support National Societies to strengthen information provision, feedback, and community participation. By mid-2025, the UIC EA had significantly expanded CEA capacity across the region, through dedicated positions, widespread training, and feedback mechanisms in most countries. However, challenges remained with feedback analysis and follow-up, community participation, programme integration, and sustaining systems as funding declined.

## Purpose and scope of the evaluation

This evaluation was commissioned by the IFRC Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia to assess how effectively community engagement approaches were implemented in the UIC EA, what difference they made, and what is needed to strengthen accountability in future operations. It covers the period from February 2022 to mid-2025 and includes all 17 impacted countries. The evaluation serves three purposes including 1) to inform evidence-based decision-making in ongoing and future emergencies, 2) identify learning that will support more effective and realistic community engagement across the Movement and 3) assess whether the UIC EA met accountability to affected people commitments and standards. It focuses on three themes:

1. **How community feedback was collected, analysed and used to inform programme design and adaptation,** including successes, challenges and recommendations.
2. **How community participation was understood and implemented,** including practical examples, enablers, barriers and recommendations.
3. **Whether CEA was institutionalised and is likely to be sustained,** including enablers, barriers, and what is needed to embed CEA within National Society systems.

This document is a summary report, and is accompanied by a full evaluation report that provides more detailed analysis and evidence.

[1] Belarus Red Cross, Bulgarian Red Cross, Croatian Red Cross, Estonian Red Cross, Georgia Red Cross, Hellenic Red Cross, Hungarian Red Cross, Latvian Red Cross, Lithuanian Red Cross, Red Cross Society of the Republic of Moldova, Red Cross of Montenegro, Red Cross of the Republic of North Macedonia, Polish Red Cross, Romanian Red Cross, Russian Red Cross, Slovak Red Cross, and Turkish Red Crescent Society.

# 2. METHODOLOGY

## Evaluation design and approach

The evaluation used a qualitative, multi-method participatory approach to capture learning across the three evaluation themes. In-person and remote methods were used to capture the perspectives and experiences of 126 staff, volunteers, and community members from National Societies, IFRC, and Partner National Societies across multiple countries and levels.

## Data collection methods

Data collection took place between the 15 September and 28 November 2025 and combined document review, participatory workshops, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs). Participants were drawn from leadership, operations, sector teams, and cross-cutting functions. Data was collected remotely and through two in-person country visits to Polish Red Cross and Bulgaria Red Cross, which included participatory workshops, KIIs, and FGDs with staff, volunteers, and community members at HQ and branch level.

A structured document review informed the evaluation design and analysis. This included appeal documents, operational reports, case studies, assessments, surveys, and CEA literature.

Participatory workshops used two main methodologies. Six feedback process mapping workshops explored how feedback was gathered and managed, identifying strengths, gaps, and examples of feedback use. Eight force field analysis workshops examined enablers, barriers and potential solutions related to community participation and the institutionalisation of CEA

A total of 39 KIIs explored overall experiences of CEA within the response, focusing on what worked, what did not, and how to strengthen CEA in future operations. FGDs with displaced people from Ukraine in Poland and Bulgaria explored their experiences of Red Cross services.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct relevance to the evaluation themes. Twelve of the 17 impacted country National Societies contributed through country visits, remote workshops, or KIIs, alongside IFRC staff at country, cluster, regional, and global levels.

## Data analysis, ethics and limitations

Qualitative data was analysed using Microsoft Excel, with inductive coding used to group recurring enablers, barriers, examples, and recommendations across the three themes. The frequency of coded responses was used to identify which issues were most commonly raised.

Findings were triangulated across methods, organisations, roles, and levels, and validated with the Evaluation Management Team and key respondents. The evaluation adhered to IFRC ethical standards, with verbal informed consent obtained and all data anonymised. The timing created some limitations as the appeal was ending, affecting staff and community availability and recall. These were mitigated through triangulation and review of earlier feedback data and reports.

# 3. COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

## 3.1 Community feedback mechanisms – a systematic approach

Community feedback mechanisms were the most visible and consistently implemented CEA approach within the UIC EA. For many National Societies, the UIC EA marked the first time feedback was collected and analysed in a systematic way.

**Feedback collection:** Feedback was collected through a wide range of channels. **Call centres** were the most common with 11 of the 17 IC National Societies operating one[2]. These ranged in size and complexity and often handled high volumes of feedback. While most feedback related to CVA case management, call centres often developed into broader information hubs. **Surveys** (needs assessments, post-distribution monitoring, perceptions) often generated large volumes of data using digital tools such as KoBo and AccessRC. **Face-to-face** feedback was collected during activities and at branch level, including through FGDs. **Social media and messaging** apps (Viber, Telegram, etc) were used to share information and monitor questions and concerns, with Netherlands Red Cross (NLRC) 510 conducting social media listening (SML) in six countries.

**Logging and storage:** The UIC EA saw a significant expansion in the use of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems, notably EspoCRM. These enabled real-time case management, categorisation, referral, and reporting. Excel files and paper forms continued to be used in parallel, particularly at branch level, meaning feedback data was not always consolidated.

**Analysis:** Call centre data was commonly analysed within CRM systems on a daily, weekly or monthly basis, and several countries shared data with the regional Power BI feedback dashboard. Survey data was typically analysed in excel or Power BI by programme, CEA or IM staff.

**Sharing and discussion:** Feedback findings were shared primarily through internal meetings at branch, country, cluster and regional levels, as well as through reports and dashboards. Feedback was also shared through the regional feedback presentations and some National Societies reported sharing findings and issues in interagency coordination forums and with donors.

**Action:** Feedback was well used in the UIC EA, most commonly to adjust programmes, but also for strategy and planning. This is documented in Section 3.3

**Response to feedback providers:** Most often, staff or volunteers answered questions or resolved issues immediately during calls. In some cases, updates were shared later via phone, email or AccessRC. Wider communication on how feedback was used was less common.

**Tracking action and response:** Some National Societies used CRM systems to track case resolution, with others relying on meeting follow-up and ongoing monitoring of feedback trends.

[2] https://go.ifrc.org/emergencies/5854/additional-info/federation-wide

## 3.2 Community feedback – what worked well?

In total, 219 successful feedback practices were shared. These show that trusted channels, practical tools, leadership support and organisational capacity and culture played a key role in supporting feedback to be shared, discussed and used.

### 1. Trusted, accessible channels and time-saving digital tools

Call centres were described as a *"game changer"* for their ability to manage high call volumes in multiple languages and resolve or refer issues in real time. Over time, they became an important source of information on broader needs and were seen as *"more natural"* than surveys, allowing people to raise what mattered most to them.

Digital tools increased the reach, speed and ease of gathering and sharing feedback. Surveys distributed through AccessRC generated large volumes of data, messaging apps provided unfiltered insight into peoples' concerns, and EspoCRM improved the visibility and useability of feedback data. At branch level, informal face-to-face feedback remained important for building trust over time. Offering multiple channels was seen as increasing accessibility and choice.

### 2. Feedback added operational value

Feedback was frequently credited with improving the effectiveness, relevance and accountability of the response by providing timely insight into needs, risks and concerns. It informed programme adjustments, supported quicker responses to issues, and strengthened dialogue with donors, governments and partners.

### 3. Feedback was shared widely, supported by good internal communication

Feedback sharing was strong within the UIC EA. Regional presentations and reports consolidated data from multiple sources and highlighted trends across countries. Meetings at branch, country and regional level provided a shared space for CEA, operations and programme staff to discuss findings and agree actions. Some National Societies linked this to a culture of good internal communication and coordination, with acting on feedback seen as a collective responsibility.

### 4. Training and support built confidence and buy-in

IFRC technical support and training was seen as critical to establishing helplines, adopting systematic processes to track and analyse data, and managing sensitive feedback safely. Rolling out training to branches built broader understanding and buy-in for feedback processes.

### 5. Leaders who championed feedback, helped it lead to action

Leaders who regularly asked about feedback and championed regional feedback sessions raised its importance and enabled practical action, including approving changes, reallocating budgets and advocating for change. Support was strongest where leaders understood CEA and its value.

## 3.3 Community feedback – was it acted on?

While secondary data includes limited examples of feedback leading to action, 121 examples of feedback use were shared during this evaluation. This is impressive, and demonstrates a clear commitment by staff and volunteers to adjust and improve support in response to feedback.

### Programme adjustments

Based on the examples shared, feedback was most commonly used to improve the relevance, accessibility and effectiveness of existing programmes. National Societies adjusted how and what was provided, when activities took place and who was eligible. Examples include adapting food and hygiene items to better reflect Ukrainian preferences, introducing mobile CVA units to reach rural areas, changing distribution times, and modifying language classes. Feedback also informed changes to CVA targeting when FGDs highlighted people in vulnerable situations had been missed.

### Informing new programmes and services

Feedback was used to identify gaps and inform the design of new programmes. At regional level, feedback informed the shift from multipurpose cash towards sector-specific assistance and the inclusion of host communities in support packages. At country level, feedback informed the introduction of new services, including soup kitchens and community concept stores.

### Case management and system improvements

Case management feedback was used to identify system issues such as exclusion errors and technical challenges, leading to improvements in the AccessRC tool, procedures and messaging.

### Advocacy and policy dialogue

Community feedback was used to strengthen advocacy with donors, governments and partners as part of humanitarian diplomacy efforts.

### Understanding needs, risks and context

Feedback provided early warning of emerging risks, misinformation and social tensions.

### Informing strategy and planning

Feedback was used by both National Societies and the IFRC Region to inform operational strategies and plans, including highlighting key gaps in the response.

### Improving information shared with communities

Feedback informed improvements in the information shared with communities, including clearer guidance on CVA registration and the reframing of MHPSS when FGDs and KIIs identified a reluctance to engage with activities labelled as ‘mental health’.

*A full, detailed, list of how feedback was acted on is included in the main findings report.*

## 3.4 Community feedback – what were the challenges?

Based on the 243 challenges shared, acting on community feedback was most constrained by weak systems, siloed ways of working, capacity gaps and limited flexibility to adapt programmes.

### 1. Feedback mechanisms worked, but the systems behind them did not

The absence of robust, centralised systems to store and track data from multiple sources led to weaknesses in how feedback was analysed, acted on, and responded to. Examples included feedback from different channels being managed in parallel systems, slow or low-quality analysis, and weak tracking which meant *"action was often based more on memory than any formal process."*

Call centres were resource-intensive to establish and sustain and often became case-management focused, rather than informing broader learning and strategy. High-reach digital platforms generated very large volumes of feedback that were difficult to monitor and respond to, while reliance on digital channels risked excluding older people and other people in vulnerable situations.

This affected community awareness and trust, with CVA PDM's showing 41% of respondents did not know how to share feedback. National Societies struggled to close the loop by explaining how feedback was used, reinforcing that *"collecting feedback is easy, but responding is much harder"*.

### 2. Feedback got lost in the silos

Weak coordination between sectors and levels limited how feedback was consolidated, analysed and used. Respondents highlighted unclear roles and responsibilities between CEA, PMER and IM, so that "*large amounts of data existed, but it was all in silos".* Feedback recommendations were not always developed with programmes and operations, which meant they were sometimes too high level to be implemented. Siloed working and weak internal coordination also limited sharing.

### 3. Capacity gaps slowed feedback analysis and action

Capacity gaps affected both feedback analysis and reporting. Analysing qualitative feedback data was described as time-intensive and technically challenging, with early gaps in CEA and IM capacity slowing analysis and reporting. As dedicated CEA roles were reduced, feedback reporting and sharing declined sharply. While the absence of CEA or IM roles in National Societies now is limiting progress towards more structured feedback systems, as *"it's not on anyone's priority list"*. Gaps in capacity also existed due to limited branch trainings, low digital literacy, and uncertainty over data protection and managing sensitive feedback.

### 4. Programmes were often 'set in stone'

Limited flexibility in funding, timelines and programme design frequently prevented feedback from being acted on, even when acknowledged as valid. Respondents described programmes as *"set in stone"*, with little scope to adapt eligibility criteria, activities or budgets. Time pressure, particularly in the early phases, reinforced a focus on speed over adapting to community needs.

## 3.5 How can we strengthen feedback use in operations?

Participants shared 163 recommendations to improve the use of community feedback in future operations. These emphasised the need for stronger systems, more collaborative ways of working, and practical support to ensure feedback leads to action.

### 1. Fix the system: make feedback easier to manage and act on

- Adopt a unified data management system that can log, track and analyse feedback from multiple channels and levels, that is sustainable and easy to use.
- Strengthen IFRC support on CRMs, with clearer guidance on cost-effective, user-friendly options that National Societies can sustain beyond emergencies.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities through National Society SOPs, setting out who is responsible for collection, analysis, sharing, action and response.
- Avoid over-complicating systems at branch level, ensuring new tools complement rather than replace informal, relationship-based feedback approaches that are working well.
- Ensure dedicated capacity for feedback analysis, including continued exploration of AI to support faster coding and synthesis.

### 2. Break the silos: make feedback a shared responsibility

- Strengthen collaboration between CEA, operations and programmes, including agreeing what data is needed and co-developing recommendations that are feasible and practical.
- Formalise feedback sharing across teams and levels, for example by making feedback a standing agenda item in coordination and programme meetings.
- Improve HQ–branch feedback loops, including sharing survey and FGD findings so branches can inform communities how feedback has been used.
- Treat assessments, monitoring and feedback as a single evidence base, clarifying roles between CEA, IM, PMER and programmes and reducing duplication.
- Leadership at all levels need to champion the use of community feedback.
- Use community feedback in advocacy with donors, governments and partners.

**3. Invest in practical skills and support**

- Make feedback trainings short, practical and task-based, especially early in the response.
- Train programme, operations and branch teams on feedback mechanisms to strengthen ownership and avoid feedback being seen as an added burden or a CEA responsibility.
- Build systems and buy-in before crises, so feedback mechanisms do not have to be created from scratch in every emergency.

***"Improving storage and analysis would likely improve the quality of actions."***

## 3.6 How can we support more sustainable feedback mechanisms?

Many National Societies experienced challenges maintaining feedback mechanisms once appeal funding reduced. However, they also wanted to protect this capacity given *"the time and effort invested and reputational risks of not having this anymore."* Sustaining these mechanisms was also seen as an important element of preparedness for future disasters. Participants shared the following suggestions on how operations can support more sustainable feedback mechanisms:

- **Match mechanisms to National Society capacity**. Feedback mechanisms should be designed so they can be maintained or scaled down after the appeal, with an emphasis on basic and sustainable over strong and costly. Systems were seen as important, but were *"only sustainable if matched with staff capacity."* Examples included reducing helpline hours, training volunteers as operators, or shifting to lower-cost channels such as email.
- **Plan sustainability and costs from the outset.** Identifying and communicating the long-term costs of feedback mechanisms early in the response was seen as critical so National Society leadership can plan and fundraise for continuation beyond the emergency phase.
- **Choose sustainable systems**. Respondents stressed the need to clarify long-term hosting, ownership and support arrangements for systems such as EspoCRM from the outset, so National Societies don't lose access to systems when the appeal closes.
- **Embed feedback in core National Society work.** Mechanisms that were used beyond the UIC EA for core National Society work were more likely to be sustained. Respondents suggested positioning call centres as a National Society-wide resource, cost-shared across programmes, and integrated into long term plans, rather than an emergency-only tool.
- **Build long-term skills and system ownership**. Training permanent staff, not only surge or response staff, was seen as key to retaining institutional knowledge.

**Case Study: A Clear, Structured Approach to Feedback in Bulgaria**

Good communication, teamwork, and strong leadership helps Bulgaria Red Cross' (BRC) Plovdiv Regional Branch make sure community feedback leads to action. The branch manages the Greenline, a national helpline set up for CVA but now providing information on all BRC services.

Each week, a branch working group made up of project staff, volunteers and the regional director meets to review and analyse all feedback received and agree on priorities and actions. CEA focal point for the Plovdiv Branch, Antoaneta Saraliyska, explains, *"Analysing the feedback as a team allows us to make shared decisions on what to prioritise and how to respond – it's not all on one person's shoulders."* This collective approach is supported by strong leadership, which enables flexibility and timely decision-making. *"We have a good regional director who manages resources in a way that lets us act on feedback,"* Toni adds. *A full version of this case study is available in the main report.*

# 4. COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

## 4.1 Community participation – a gap between intention and practice

Across the UIC EA, community participation was consistently referenced in strategies and plans, with commitments to *"work collaboratively with displaced people".* In practice however, meaningful participation was not well understood and examples of communities participating in the design of activities, beyond needs assessments or providing feedback, were limited and mostly took place later in the response.

### Participation was not well understood

While staff supported the principle of participation, there was no shared understanding of what this meant in practice. As one respondent reflected, *"We're very vague in how we talk about this and it's hard for National Societies to implement. The problem stems from not defining it enough ourselves."* As a result, participation was often understood as asking people about their needs or opinions, rather than joint decision-making or co-design.

### Community participation struggled to move beyond consultation

Only 46 examples of communities participating in the response were shared, compared to the 121 examples of feedback being used. More than half related to communities being consulted through needs assessments, PDMs, FGDs, or feedback mechanisms. Participants explained these approaches helped them gather information on priority needs, satisfaction levels and, in some cases, risks. Communities consulted during this evaluation confirmed that they were not involved in programme design.

Where participation went beyond consultation, this was mostly later in the response or small-scale and branch-led. Examples include communities informing decisions about CVA eligibility in Bulgaria, Montenegro and Slovakia and branches working with displaced people from Ukraine to plan language classes, PSS activities, and livelihood courses in Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia.

Examples of participation during the emergency phase were limited, but included using FGDs to plan the shelter programme in Slovakia (see page 11). Only two examples of communities planning and leading activities with National Society support were identified across the response, one of which is documented on page 11.

Overall, the findings suggest that while participation was valued in principle, it was not consistently translated into shared decision-making, highlighting a gap between intention, understanding and practice.

## 4.2 What enabled community participation in the UIC EA?

During workshops and KIIs, respondents identified 104 community participation enablers. Overall, participation was best supported where strong community relationships existed, staff and volunteers valued and understood it, and it was seen as necessary for programme success.

### 1. Relationships and trust mattered more than formal methods

Strong connections to the community at branch level emerged as an important enabler of participation in primary and secondary data. Collaboration with Ukrainian diaspora groups in particular was reported as building trust and improving understanding of needs and priorities.

The widespread recruitment of Ukrainian staff and volunteers further strengthened these connections, by improving access, cultural understanding, and trust. Over time, Ukrainian staff and volunteers played an important bridging role between National Societies and the wider Ukrainian community. As one respondent noted, *"It's easier for Ukrainians to open up to another Ukrainian as they share the same language and experience."*

The shift from large-scale CVA to more branch-led PSS and integration activities also helped build closer relationships with the community. Branches explained that people were more willing to share ideas and experiences in informal settings such as community centres and internet cafés, compared to formal consultations.

### 2. Understanding and prior experience supported stronger participation

National Societies with existing CEA experience were perceived as better able to implement participatory approaches. Similarly, working with operations managers who already understood CEA made it easier to prioritise participation within programme planning and delivery.

Understanding the value of participation and having the right mindset and culture also played an important role. Respondents emphasised that empathy, openness and a willingness to work collaboratively with communities were critical, alongside good internal communication between teams and levels. As one participant noted, *"Skills and training are important, but you have to have the right mindset and personality".*

### 3. Necessity was a strong driver for participation

Participation was also enabled when it was seen as necessary for programme success. This was particularly the case for more complex interventions such as shelter, livelihoods and psychosocial support, where understanding people's circumstances, preferences and risks was essential. As one respondent explained, *"If you don't understand these, the programme simply wouldn't have worked."* In these contexts, participation was less likely to be treated as optional and more likely to be embedded within programme planning and delivery.

### Case Study: Using Rapid FGDs to Co-Design Shelter Support in Slovakia

In the early phase of the Ukraine response, the Slovak Red Cross (SRC) needed to design a rental and hosting shelter programme under intense time pressure. Providing this type of support required a nuanced understanding of people's living arrangements, housing markets, hosting dynamics, and longer-term intentions. Without community input, there was a real risk hosting arrangements would fail, pushing families back into collective centres or the overstretched rental market. Rather than relying on assumptions, SRC and IFRC conducted a series of rapid FGDs and KIIs with displaced people from Ukraine and host families.

Within one week, branches facilitated small, informal FGDs and KIIs across several regions, complemented by a rapid rental market review. A "snowball" approach helped identify participants quickly, with hosts and displaced people from Ukraine referring others. Despite involving only 20–25 participants, the findings directly influenced programme design. Evidence showed that renting was more common than expected and hosting often involved annexes or second properties, leading SRC to revise targeting ratios and adjust transfer values by location. FGDs also revealed hidden costs that threatened hosting arrangements, prompting the inclusion of top-up grants. Safeguarding risks within hosting arrangements were also identified, leading to stronger measures and guidance. Feedback further highlighted childcare barriers preventing women from working, which branches later used to advocate for complementary services.

This case demonstrates that even limited, rapid participation during an emergency can prevent design flaws, strengthen safeguarding, and improve programme relevance and effectiveness.

### Case Study: Partnering with Ukrainian Associations in Türkiye

The Turkish Red Crescent Society (TRCS) strengthened community participation in the UIC EA by working through existing Ukrainian Associations rather than its own community centres. TRCS recognised that its standard approach, developed through work with other migrant communities, was not suited to displaced people from Ukraine due to language, cultural differences, and limited prior engagement.

While the associations lacked humanitarian experience, they had strong community trust, language skills and social networks. TRCS signed agreements with three associations and provided equipment and training on protection, PSEA, CEA, feedback handling, communication, teamwork and project management. The associations then planned and implemented activities with TRCS funding, supervision and technical support. Associations led distributions, supported PSS activities, identified and referred people in vulnerable situations, and managed community communication and feedback. TRCS staff participated as observers and advisors rather than organisers.

By transferring decision-making power to the associations, TRCS enabled assistance to reflect Ukrainian needs and preferences. The associations also identified needs that would otherwise have been missed, including GBV support for women. This approach strengthened both community participation and resilience, and contributed to a more locally-led response.

## 4.3 What prevented community participation in the UIC EA?

The 126 barriers shared show that participation was limited more by capacity, unclear ownership and operational constraints, than a lack of interest or commitment. These barriers help explain why participation remained limited despite strong rhetorical commitment in plans and strategies.

### 1. Staff feel they lack the time and skills for community participation

In the early stages, branches described being overwhelmed by the scale and urgency of needs, leaving little time to move beyond information-sharing. As the response progressed, funding reductions further reduced capacity, with trained staff lost or multiple roles combined into one. Several respondents stressed the absence of dedicated CEA capacity, noting that without someone responsible for making sense of inputs, participation risked becoming tokenistic.

While willingness to engage communities often existed, staff described a lack of confidence and experience in how to move beyond assessments and consultations towards more collaborative approaches. This contributed to perceptions that participation was a *"huge, timely process"* that felt complex and overwhelming. These challenges were reinforced by a lack of practical tools and guidance on participation in urban and dispersed contexts, with global CEA tools and terminology often described as not sufficiently adapted to the European setting.

### 2. It's not clear who is responsible for participation

A lack of clarity over who is responsible for participation further weakened implementation. Participation was often perceived as the responsibility of CEA staff rather than programme teams, a situation compounded by IFRC's siloed approach to operations. As one respondent noted, *"If it's a separate budget line, you think it's not your job."*

### 3. IFRC operations are not set up to support participation

Rigid programme design, donor constraints and tight timelines were widely cited as limiting community influence over programme design. Branch staff in particular reported limited influence over IFRC-funded programmes, with little room for co-design at local level. Pressure *"to be seen responding versus involving communities in the process"* meant participation was frequently deprioritised, especially early on. Many felt there was an over-emphasis on speed, outputs and quantity, with participation seen as *"something for later on when the programme is up and running."*

### 4. The community want to participate, but did not always feel confident or able to

Communities also experienced barriers to participation, including language and psychosocial factors such as shame, fear, exhaustion, and low confidence. FGD participants described feeling uncomfortable suggesting *"non-essential"* activities. This was sometimes interpreted as a lack of will, but actually highlights the link between participation and psychosocial wellbeing, particularly in migration contexts where integration challenges compound trauma and uncertainty.

## 4.4 How can we strengthen community participation in operations?

Participants shared 147 recommendations to strengthen participation. These emphasise the need for a clearer and more realistic approach to participation, strengthened capacity across teams, and better integration of participation into operational processes. Participation does not need to be extensive to be meaningful, but it does need to be intentional.

**1. Adopt a clear, realistic and practical approach to participation**

- Make better use of branches, volunteers and humanitarian service points (HSPs) as trusted and underused entry points for participation.
- The recruitment of staff and volunteers from the affected community is a good practice that should be replicated in future operations.
- Tailor participation to the phase, programme and context, starting with consultation during the emergency phase and progressing to more co-design and joint decision-making as the response stabilises and moves towards longer-term programmes.
- Ensure participatory processes have a clear purpose, including who should be involved and how their input will influence decisions, so people safe and valued to engage.

**2. Build capacity and confidence to implement participatory approaches**

- Simplify participation guidance and training, with clear definitions and step-by-step approaches tailored to European, urban and migration contexts.
- Strengthen participation skills across all technical staff, not only those working in CEA, by integrating participation into sector-specific and operational trainings.
- Invest in preparedness for participation, including building capacity in “peacetime” and embedding participatory approaches in regular programming.

**3. Integrate participation into operational processes and leadership priorities**

- Clarify that programme teams lead participation, with CEA staff providing technical support, and make this an explicit responsibility within sector roles.
- Integrate participation into operational processes, including assessments, programme design, SOPs and planning tools.
- Strengthen advocacy for participation by positioning it as necessary for quality and effectiveness, to ensure leadership allocates adequate time, staffing and resources.
- Link participation more closely with psychosocial support and integration activities.

***“Participation is possible in the first six months, but we need to be realistic and don’t aim for rockets, when all we need is bicycles.”***

# 5. CEA INSTITUTIONALISATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

## 5.1 CEA institutionalisation - Strong gains, but an uncertain future

Commitments to institutionalising CEA featured prominently in regional strategies and country plans for the UIC EA, where CEA was framed as a cross-cutting organisational process rather than a standalone activity. Plans set out an ambitious vision, including appointing CEA focal points, delivering trainings, integrating CEA into staff and volunteer development, and developing CEA strategies, policies and systems intended to strengthen National Societies beyond the response.

In practice, CEA trainings and feedback mechanisms were the main focus. By December 2024, more than 2,000 staff and volunteers had been trained, and many National Societies had established professional call centres, with IFRC and NLRC 510 support. Progress was also made in staffing, with more than ten National Societies appointing CEA focal points by mid-2024.

However, sustaining these investments proved challenging as appeal funding declined. By 2025, reporting[3] showed the number of National Societies with feedback mechanisms had fallen sharply from ten to four, and only eight still had a CEA focal point. Policy and strategy development remained limited, with 2025 global CEA monitoring showing that only one reporting National Society had a CEA policy, one a National Society-wide CEA plan, and three had integrated CEA into their organisational strategy. While not all approaches were expected to be sustained, the UIC EA created important foundations. The extent to which these gains translate into more consistent community engagement beyond the EA is explored in the following sections.

**Case Study: Institutionalising CEA through emergency operations in Greece**

Hellenic Red Cross (HRC) began its CEA institutionalisation journey during the 2015 migration response, using the emergency as an entry point to test and demonstrate the operational value of CEA. Rather than allowing these practices to fade once the crisis ended, HRC deliberately continued the process over the following decade, gradually integrating CEA into domestic programmes. This included appointing dedicated staff capacity, investing in feedback mechanisms, developing CEA SOPs and policies, and building organisational understanding and acceptance of CEA as a cross-cutting approach. By the time of the Ukraine response, HRC was in a fundamentally different position compared to 2015, with CEA approaches and capacity already in place. HRC's experience demonstrates that National Societies can use emergency operations as a foundation for institutionalising CEA, but only if this work continues after the crisis. By investing consistently in policy, people, and practice, HRC entered the Ukraine response better prepared and more accountable. *A full version of this case study is available in the main report.*

[3] Based on those reporting to the Federation-wide Monitoring and Reporting UIC indicator tracking tool.

## 5.2 What supported CEA to be institutionalised?

Based on the 193 enablers shared, progress towards CEA institutionalisation was strongest where leadership commitment, dedicated CEA roles, and National Society understanding and willingness aligned, a finding echoed in many other evaluations.

### 1. Training and technical support built skills, but it also changed mindsets

Capacity building through training, peer learning and technical accompaniment was viewed as critical for building CEA understanding, ownership and skills. Training-of-trainers helped spread knowledge more widely, while short task-based trainings and briefings helped link CEA to day-to-day work. Technical accompaniment, peer learning, and access to the community engagement hub were all reported as valuable and helping to support CEA institutionalisation.

Together, these approaches contributed to a shift in mindset, with growing recognition that listening to communities is central to quality and accountability, evidenced by the growing confidence, ownership, and independent use of CEA in branches and programmes. As one National Society explained, *"The training opened my eyes and made me focus on things I hadn't considered before. It put CEA on the agenda and helped to change mindsets."*

### 2. Embedding CEA in operations showed why it matters

The UIC EA provided an important platform for introducing CEA to National Societies in a more integrated and systematic way. While elements of CEA existed before the response, the appeal helped formalise and operationalise practices by embedding CEA into plans and sectors such as CVA, migration and NSD. The use of practical tools such as feedback mechanisms helped demonstrate the value of CEA and how it can benefit programmes and operations. For some National Societies, this integration continued beyond the response, with CEA being incorporated into organisational strategies, disaster management approaches, reporting processes and assessments, supporting longer-term institutionalisation.

### 3. Dedicated CEA staff positions made institutionalisation possible

Dedicated CEA staff positions were widely viewed as critical to institutionalisation, with the UIC EA credited with creating the conditions for these roles to exist. National Societies said dedicated CEA staffing helped them move forward more quickly with institutionalisation, while longer-term IFRC CEA roles were important for providing consistent, sustained technical support.

### 4. Leadership support made a decisive difference

Leadership support at regional and country levels was consistently identified as an enabling condition for CEA institutionalisation. As one senior leader explained, *"Integration depended on the conceptual understanding of both ops managers and NS - where this was strong, CEA was embedded more successfully."*

## 5.3 What prevented CEA from being institutionalised?

Drawing on 239 barriers shared, findings show that progress towards CEA institutionalisation was constrained by limited leadership prioritisation, insufficient dedicated CEA capacity and uneven organisational understanding, echoing findings from other evaluations.

### 1. At times, CEA felt too heavy, complex and overwhelming

IFRC's approach to CEA and how it was presented to National Societies was widely cited as a barrier to institutionalisation. Many respondents felt the volume of tools, guidance and minimum actions was overwhelming and not sufficiently adapted to National Society contexts and capacities. As one IFRC respondent reflected, *"When an NS looks at the long list of minimum actions, it can feel scary and overwhelming."* This was compounded when IFRC CEA staff placed unrealistic expectations on National Societies and operations managers, and did not take time to understand the local context and capacity. Several National Societies also described being overwhelmed by the number of cross-cutting approaches introduced simultaneously.

### 2. A lack of CEA staff positions and funding stalled progress

Without dedicated CEA roles, National Societies struggled to coordinate, support and mainstream CEA across programmes and branches, particularly when one person was expected to cover multiple roles. Declining appeal funding further undermined sustainability, with difficulties retaining CEA staff and systems once resources reduced. Respondents also described gaps in IFRC support during transitions, noting the withdrawal of delegate capacity before national positions were in place led to lost momentum and signalled that CEA was not a priority.

### 3. CEA understanding improved, but gaps remain

Despite significant investment in training, understanding of CEA and its value remained uneven across staff, branches and leadership. For many National Societies, CEA was a new concept in 2022, introduced amidst the pressures of a large-scale emergency. Respondents felt some still perceive CEA as donor-driven or externally imposed. This is exacerbated by a lack of clear CEA procedures or policy to govern work with communities, which leads to inconsistent practices and reliance on individual staff, with one noting, *"If staff change, the whole system risks collapsing."*

### 4. Declining leadership support made institutionalisation difficult

CEA progress often depended on individual leaders' understanding and interest, with quality approaches at risk of deprioritisation as funding declined. Limited leadership buy-in made it difficult to progress National Society-wide efforts such as developing a CEA strategy. As one National Society explained, *"If the top don't prioritise it, then forget about it."* Within IFRC, a lack of mechanisms to integrate cross-cutting approaches means progress often depended on individual relationships and interest rather than organisational structures.

## 5.4 How can operations better support CEA institutionalisation?

Participants shared 174 recommendations to institutionalise CEA and make it sustainable. These highlight the need to make CEA more manageable, resource it adequately, strengthen understanding, and see it as an organisation-wide approach.

### 1. Make CEA realistic and relevant for National Societies

- Simplify the approach and build on existing practice, starting small and aligning tools and expectations with what National Societies can realistically sustain or scale down.
- Adopt realistic timelines, recognising that institutionalisation is a gradual process that requires effort before, during and after emergencies.
- CEA activities need to be concrete and clearly show how they add value to the response.
- Adopt a more coordinated approach to cross-cutting topics (CEA, PGI, IM) to reduce burden and confusion for National Societies.
- IFRC can support more sustainable approaches in National Societies through improved transition planning, and more emphasis on quality and learning over volume and outputs.

### 2. Institutionalisation needs human and financial investment.

- CEA needs a named person to drive it forward. If combined, roles need a realistic workload and clear priorities. If no role is possible, CEA responsibilities should be clearly allocated across other staff positions and reflected in job descriptions.
- Regional IFRC CEA capacity is essential to provide ongoing support to National Societies.
- Fund CEA as a core cost by seeing it as a quality and programme support function.

### 3. Improve CEA knowledge, understanding and ownership

- Short, tailored CEA trainings rolled out to branches, combined with follow-up support.
- Sustain peer learning between National Societies to exchange ideas and practices.

### 4. Make CEA an organisation-wide effort

- Make CEA non-optional, by integrating it all sectors, building on the success with CVA.
- Embed CEA in long-term planning, including National Society strategies and Unified Plans.
- Make CEA a shared responsibility, with programmes leading and CEA supporting.
- Greater advocacy by IFRC leadership to National Society leadership on the benefits of CEA and risks of weak accountability and consider making CEA mandatory to receive funding.
- National Societies should develop CEA SOPs or policies to define commitments, responsibilities and expectations, supporting organisational consistency and buy-in.

***"The secretariat needs to 'walk the talk' and show CEA is a need-to have, not a nice-to-have."***

# 6. CONCLUSIONS

- **CEA was widely valued across the response.**
  Respondents consistently described CEA as one of the most useful and visible aspects of the UIC EA. It was credited with improving understanding, strengthening accountability, and contributing to more relevant and trusted programmes.
- **CEA was most effective when treated as a core operational responsibility.** Where CEA was integrated into programme design and operational decision-making, it supported faster adaptation, better risk management and improved quality. Where it was treated as a technical add-on or reporting requirement, its influence was limited.
- **CEA progress was highly dependent on leadership and operations management.** The extent to which CEA was prioritised often depended on the interest and understanding of operations managers and senior leaders. This created uneven practice across countries and undermined sustainability, highlighting the need for CEA to be embedded as a non-negotiable operational function not a nice-to-have.
- **Community feedback was acted on, but system weaknesses constrained impact.** The evaluation identified many examples of feedback leading to programme changes, service adaptations and advocacy, representing a step forward compared to previous responses. However, weak systems for analysis, tracking and follow-up meant much of this work relied on individuals rather than institutional processes.
- **Community participation remained limited and largely consultative.**
  Despite strong intentions, participation rarely moved beyond consultation. This reflected gaps in staff capacity, unclear ownership and role, and operational pressures to respond, rather than a lack of interest from staff or communities.
- **The UIC EA strengthened CEA in the region, but gains remain fragile.**
  While the response significantly increased awareness, skills and investment in CEA, declining funding and reduced capacity place these gains at risk without continued institutional commitment. If this happens, many National Societies may find themselves rebuilding capacity and systems from scratch when the next crisis occurs.
- **National Society and IFRC perspectives differed in their perspectives.**
  Across feedback, participation and institutionalisation, National Societies and IFRC broadly aligned on the value of CEA and the risks posed by weak systems, limited staffing and declining leadership prioritisation. Differences lay in emphasis: National Societies prioritised frontline concerns such as staffing, funding, the operational burden of managing feedback and participation, and lack of flexibility to make programme changes. IFRC focused more on system-level issues such as internal coordination, CEA integration, leadership support, and organisational mindset.

# 7. FIVE CHANGES TO STRENGTHEN CEA IN FUTURE OPERATIONS

This section sets out five strategic changes needed to strengthen community engagement in future emergency operations. They build on the evaluation findings and focus on the system-level conditions required for feedback to be used effectively, participation to be meaningful, and CEA to be sustained beyond an appeal.

These changes will require a collective commitment and collaboration across sectors and levels within IFRC and National Societies. They underscore that strengthening CEA is primarily an organisational challenge, requiring systems, leadership, skills and resourcing to align in support of a shared commitment to accountability as a core component of quality humanitarian action.

## CHANGE 1: Strengthen leadership engagement

CEA outcomes during the UIC EA depended heavily on leadership understanding, prioritisation and follow-through. Where leaders at all levels actively championed CEA, feedback was used and participation strengthened. Where leadership understanding or commitment was weak, CEA was deprioritised or treated as a compliance exercise.

**Key actions**

- **Strengthen leadership understanding** through clear, compelling evidence on the value of CEA and risks of weak accountability, tailored to Secretary Generals, Heads of Delegation, and operations managers. *(IFRC regional global CEA and leadership)*
- **Use peer-to-peer leadership advocacy** to reinforce that CEA is a non-negotiable part of emergency response. *(IFRC cluster, regional and global leadership and IFRC global and regional Disasters, Climate and Crises (DCC))*
- **Make CEA a condition of IFRC funding** by requiring basic community engagement standards and activities as part of funding agreements. *(IFRC global leadership)*
- **Lead by example in operations:** Require operations managers to routinely ask how feedback and participation are informing decisions. *(IFRC regional and global DCC and IFRC Operations and Appeal managers)*
- **Allocate resources,** including funding, staffing, and time. *(IFRC global leadership and DCC)*

## CHANGE 2: Clear, simple and structured approach

CEA worked best where tools and processes were practical, contextualised and manageable. Overly complex approaches reduced buy-in, consistency and sustainability.

**Key actions**

- **Simplify IFRC's CEA approach**, by focusing on "good enough" minimum actions in emergencies and shorter guidance, tools and trainings. *(IFRC global and region CEA, DCC)*
- **Develop practical methods to support participation in emergencies**, focusing on branches and volunteers. Set realistic expectations and build on good practices, such as recruiting Ukrainian staff and volunteers. *(IFRC regional and global CEA, DCC, and NS)*
- **Share learning from this evaluation** with the CEA surge roster and pool of operations managers to inform future operations. *(IFRC CEA and DCC global)*
- **Support National Societies to define their own CEA standards and SOPs** to build internal understanding and buy-in and support a more consistent approach across branches and programmes. *(National Society CEA and IFRC region CEA, DCC and NSD)*
- **Strengthen feedback data management** by supporting National Societies to identify cost-effective, user-friendly systems. *(IFRC CEA, DT, IM, IT and PMER with NS)*

## CHANGE 3: A shared operational responsibility

CEA was most effective where roles and responsibilities were clear and programmes took ownership. When CEA was 'out-sourced' participation and feedback use remained more limited.

**Key actions**

- **Embed minimum CEA requirements into IFRC operational processes and templates**, so it becomes a standard part of operations, rather than reliant on the interest and understanding of individual managers. *(IFRC DCC global, with CEA global)*
- **Create structured spaces for joint planning and decision-making within operations,** so that feedback and participation can practically support programme adjustments. *(IFRC DCC and CEA global and region)*
- **Clarify roles so programmes and operations are responsible for participation and feedback use,** with CEA providing technical support. *(IFRC DCC and CEA global and region)*
- **Treat assessments, monitoring and feedback as one evidence base**, not separate processes with clear roles across teams. *(IFRC IM, CEA, PMER, operations global and region)*
- **Introduce CEA, PGI and IM** in a more combined and coordinated way to National Societies to reduce burden and confusion. *(IFRC CEA, PGI and IM global and region)*

## CHANGE 4: Build knowledge skills and confidence

Skills, knowledge, and prior experience strongly shaped whether CEA moved from intent to practice. Limited understanding led to CEA deprioritisation in favour of more familiar activities.

**Key actions**

- **Address gaps in CEA understanding within National Societies**, through short, tailored CEA trainings and briefings, with a focus on building branch-level capacity. *(NS CEA)*
- **Strengthen CEA capacity pre-disaster** to avoid starting from scratch in emergencies. *(IFRC leadership and CEA region)*
- **Maintain sufficient IFRC CEA technical capacity to support National Societies**, including to continue the process of institutionalising CEA. *(IFRC leadership region)*
- **Use short, simple, task-based trainings and briefings** for National Societies in emergencies, rather than multi-day courses. *(IFRC CEA region and global)*
- **Scale up peer learning** so National Societies can access support and advice when needed. *(IFRC CEA region and global)*
- **Integrate CEA into other operational management and sector trainings** so all staff have the skills to manage feedback and implement participatory approaches. *(IFRC DCC and CEA global and region)*

## CHANGE 5: Allocate adequate resources

CEA cannot be sustained without dedicated capacity and predictable funding. Where CEA roles existed, feedback, participation and institutionalisation progressed; where they did not, momentum stalled.

**Key actions**

- **Support dedicated CEA roles where possible,** tied to programme quality and funded across projects. Where roles are combined, set clear, manageable priorities. *(NS leadership)*
- **If dedicated CEA capacity is not possible,** allocate CEA responsibilities to different staff roles and write these into job descriptions. *(NS leadership)*
- **Integrate CEA in core plans and budgets,** so it is funded, part of project deliverables, and measured. *(NS and IFRC leadership, CEA and programmes)*
- **Allocate adequate funding and staff time** for feedback management, analysis, participation and institutionalisation. *(NS leadership)*
- **Recognise CEA institutionalisation as a long-term NSD process** requiring sustained support, investment and technical accompaniment. *(IFRC leadership and CEA region)*