



IRC Client Voice and Choice Initiative and Ground Truth Solutions

Case Study X: The Search for Standardisation in Feedback Mechanisms

July 2016



Overview

This is a reflective case study on the subject of standardisation in feedback mechanisms, written as a dialogue between the International Rescue Committee (IRC) Client Voice and Choice (CVC) initiative and Ground Truth Solutions at Keystone Accountability.

The insights and questions are drawn from the collective experience of implementing a series Ground Truth Solutions approach pilots on the client feedback cycle in Greece, Kenya, South Sudan, and southern Syria (via the Jordan cross-border programme). Reports on the case study pilots provide illustration of some of the themes discussed below.

During the piloting process, one of the most discussed topics was whether it is possible to standardise an approach to client responsiveness. Would something like the Ground Truth methodology work everywhere? How can the IRC—when committed to becoming more client responsive across the agency—introduce a set of practices that are relevant for and taken up by all country programmes? This case study examines these and related questions through a dialogue between the IRC and Ground Truth.

The Ground Truth Methodology

Ground Truth Solutions at Keystone Accountability developed an approach to implementing the client feedback cycle, which has the potential to benefit the IRC and allow the organisation to learn from Ground Truth's methods.

Ground Truth uses targeted questions and facilitates feedback processes to reduce 'survey fatigue.' Questions are tailored to the particular programme and developed through workshops, which then provide the IRC with relevant and actionable information.

Key elements of the Ground Truth approach involve promoting internal organisational discussion regarding potential implications of client feedback, and external dialogue opportunities with clients to validate, further understand, and collectively develop solutions to the feedback hand-in-hand with clients. In addition, to improve accountability Ground Truth encourages the organisation to communicate back to clients both the feedback received and what is being done in response.

(For further information, please see Annex 2. Background to the Ground Truth Pilots)



The Search for Standardisation

1. Can a single methodology be applied to all contexts to make programmes responsive?

i. The IRC found that the Ground Truth methodology did not always seem appropriate for every intervention. For example, from the outset the IRC decided against applying the Ground Truth methodology to any programme dealing with sensitive topics like gender-based violence (GBV) or child protection. Are different methodologies appropriate for different interventions?

GROUND TRUTH PERSPECTIVE

Context is always key, and exploring how to best listen and respond to feedback from affected people is always the first step in the Ground Truth approach. Some issues do not lend themselves to extensive public enquiry, but it is usually possible to get the sense from a Ground Truth survey whether any underlying issues require follow up using one-on-one discussions or focus group techniques to dig deeper. The process of inquiry is not the problem; rather, it is how the inquiry is conducted and feedback used. In other words, while the principles of the Ground Truth approach—listening to people and responding to their views—are applicable in most contexts, it may be necessary to use supplementary tools to make sense of what is learned and formulate an effective response strategy.

IRC PERSPECTIVE

We agree that context is always paramount. The channels that a programme team select through which to capture client perspectives must be appropriate to that programme's subject matter, methodology, and the capacity and constraints of the programme team. While surveys can offer a broad and comprehensive insight into client perspectives across a range of issues, surveys also tend to involve broad, random sampling of the client community. When dealing with extremely sensitive issues we must be careful that the methods we use are conflict sensitive and do not cause harm to the clients and to our relationship with them. In cases such as GBV and child protection, one-on-one interviews are probably more appropriate. The Ground Truth cycle can still be followed, but publicly visible methods of enquiry, like surveys and focus group discussions, may not always be the best choice.

ii. Is a focus on proactively soliciting client feedback (such as through the Ground Truth methodology) enough, or will we always need other reactive channels, such complaints boxes, and what the IRC terms “open channels,” or ongoing and open dialogue with clients through everyday interactions?

GROUND TRUTH PERSPECTIVE

Finding out what people think in a proactive mode is important is ascertaining whether a programme delivers what it aims to achieve for its intended beneficiaries. Proactively tracking key perceptual indicators of programme performance provides data for systematic application in management and decision-making processes. This is because it highlights what managers see as actionable and affected people see as important, thanks to the efforts that go into survey design and testing. Ground Truth surveys also provide a representative sample that is important in justifying follow-up action. This does not mean that other sources of feedback do not add to what is learned through proactive means.

In particular, reactive or passive systems—sometimes referred to as ‘always on’ systems—allow individuals to raise specific concerns and, when the systems work, can help promote the inclusion of minority views and/or marginal voices. However, open channels are often not reinforced by effective referral systems and too rarely lead to follow-up action.

The challenge is to find the best mix of proactively gathered and spontaneously provided feedback, with one providing an important complement to the other. Though rare, when this happens affected people can raise issues that are important to them as individuals while operational organisations can accurately monitor people’s perceptions on key indicators the organisations wish to track.

IRC PERSPECTIVE

Proactive channels—where the programme team has control over who and what is asked, and when and how—are certainly the most beneficial means to provide information on client perspectives on which the team can act. Oftentimes, the perceptual information obtained through reactive channels is limited to a specific experience of a single user and does not provide the implementing organisation with certainty on whether the particular view is one that is widely held. The information received through these reactive channels does not always offer insight into client views on how to remedy a particular issue being reported. However, reactive channels are also more open-ended, meaning clients can provide perspectives on the issue of their choosing, whenever they wish and beyond the parameters of the set questions in proactive channels. Reactive channels also provide an important check and balance between proactive efforts.

In addition, useful information about client perspectives on services and humanitarian agencies’ staff behaviour and attitudes towards them can only be communicated through informal interactions. Many clients may only feel comfortable sharing their perspectives, complaints and ideas in person with humanitarian agency staff that they know and trust. Much of this information is unrecorded and unacknowledged, informing only micro-level decisions regarding programme operations; this feedback is rarely communicated to the wider, formal decision-making level of project leadership. Nevertheless, there is scope to record and transmit this information more systematically. End-of-day team discussions or weekly meetings that encourage frontline staff to share feedback heard from clients can be a useful first step. Demonstrating interest in feedback within staff meetings can encourage frontline staff to listen more attentively and accurately capture and convey clients’ perspectives.

In sum, the IRC remains enthusiastic supporters both of appropriate, well thought out proactive methods to understand our clients’ perspectives as well as establishing secure mechanisms for clients to spontaneously communicate feedback or lodge complaints. The IRC is also searching for better ways to align these channels through improved analysis of the information that programme teams receive. Brought together, all communications channels enrich decision-making to make IRC more responsive and effective.

iii. How do client responsive approaches, such as the Ground Truth methodology, work alongside standard monitoring and evaluation tools?

GROUND TRUTH PERSPECTIVE

Ground Truth’s methodology, which provides reliable, on-going data on humanitarian organisations’ services to affected populations, contributes an additional dimension to regular monitoring and evaluation. As donor demands shift from tracking outputs to tracking beneficiary feedback, collecting perceptual data may become more central to standard monitoring. In addition, collecting peoples’ views during the lifetime of a programme adds to the richness of the evaluative process by providing what is often missing from the programme narrative—the authentic

voice of the people. Client feedback can also reduce programme costs and improve outcomes, since evaluations could use data collected throughout the intervention rather than collecting it at the end of the programme, when it is too late to act on.

IRC PERSPECTIVE

Traditional monitoring and evaluation systems capture information from clients, which is used to validate indicators that humanitarian agencies have defined as representing progress towards intended outcomes. Client responsiveness, on the other hand, advocates using client perspectives as an alternate measure of success. It means asking clients to define what outcomes they want to achieve through the assistance of the programme, and what their view of success is. Client perspectives are an extremely important counterweight to assumptions about what and how best humanitarian agencies can provide assistance.

On the surface, capturing client perspectives for the purpose of routine monitoring and evaluation, and capturing client perspectives for the purpose of improved responsiveness, may look similar. However, the intention behind doing so is different and, as a result, the precise information captured and what is done with that information can vary considerably.

2. Can a taxonomy of standard themes and questions be used when designing an approach to collecting client feedback?

Standardising themes and questions can be useful. Performance against core areas can be compared, monitored, and managed across an organisation, and it makes designing a feedback system easier. But, is it possible? Programme teams tend to want specific, bespoke questions that provide exactly the information needed to implement the programmes. So, where does an appropriate balance lie between standardised themes and bespoke questions?

GROUND TRUTH PERSPECTIVE

Ground Truth developed a standard set of questions around themes that consider feedback on four critical dimensions of performance: the relevance and value of services; the quality of service delivery; the quality of relationships (trust, respect, fairness, self-efficacy, and empowerment); and how constituents (clients) perceive and experience the results of the intervention (positive or negative). These dimensions are loosely based on the relationship and performance metrics used by the customer relations industry that are proven reliable predictors of business success. Experience suggests that regular feedback from constituents enables organisations to manage each of these performance dimensions more effectively, resulting in learning and course correcting throughout a programme cycle.

Ground Truth's performance dimensions link closely to the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) commitments. As the CHS commitments become an integral part of performance management in the humanitarian sector, Ground Truth's feedback methodology offers a way for enabling affected populations to bring their perspectives to bear on the efforts of humanitarian actors to comply with the CHS commitments and, in so doing, improve the quality and accountability of operations.

While standard questions can be used to track perceptions on some key quality and accountability themes, answers will always be specific to context. Crucial to this is analysing answers and interpreting data with special consideration of context to ensure data results in appropriate action.

Questions that work in most contexts are those that relate to the quality of relationships between humanitarian agencies and their clients, and the extent to which people feel empowered. Meanwhile, questions about services are more site or sector specific, although issues like timeliness and relevance of services can be used in multiple contexts and geographies, and analysed according to the particular aspects of the situation.

Within sectors, it is possible to standardise across sectors or clusters (nutrition or water, sanitation, and hygiene, for example), thereby also allowing for consistency at this level.

IRC PERSPECTIVE

The core themes that Ground Truth described have informed the seven themes that the IRC intends to apply as the starting point for its feedback surveys:

1. Service **relevance**
2. Service **quality**
3. Service outcomes or **impact**
4. Service accessibility, safety, and non-discrimination, and adherence to other **protection mainstreaming** principles
5. **Trust** in the IRC services, and in the IRC's ability and willingness to be responsive
6. **Respectful and dignified** service delivery, and professionalism of IRC staff
7. **Agency and empowerment** created through service delivery

The IRC is interested in developing and testing these themes and compare programmes. Are all IRC programmes in a given country felt by clients as equally relevant (to help determine where to invest)? Does a particular programme consistently receive client feedback that suggests a low level of trust in the IRC (to determine if a particular programme requires attention and support from regional management to improve the IRC–client relationship or signal possible risks that the programme teams face)?

These themes can serve as a useful starting point to design channels to capture client perspectives, and act as a checklist for a programme team to verify whether it addressed the main areas upon which clients may wish to provide feedback. However, IRC's experience of the Ground Truth pilots revealed that some programme teams perceive certain themes as irrelevant to the programme, or have concerns about asking questions related to a certain theme. A number of programmes were hesitant to ask questions about outcomes, whether the service was helping the clients meet a need. Often fearing that the service(s) were not meeting the clients' priority needs (that, perhaps, the programme team had no capacity to meet), programme teams preferred not to ask those related questions. Nevertheless, knowing the answers—whether positive or negative—is important for the IRC's ability to be more client responsive.

Client satisfaction levels across these themes cannot be easily compared among programmes without significant and specific contextual background. For example, protection programmes that provide clients information on where and how to access services are (as revealed by clients in surveys) typically not as valued as services that provide tangible, immediate assistance such as healthcare. This feedback should not undermine the value of information-providing services, and programme teams should be cautious about making programming decisions solely on client preferences. This may seem counterintuitive to the idea of client responsiveness, yet the IRC's definition of responsiveness emphasises that client perspectives are given due weight and consideration in decision-making processes alongside other information sources, such as previous experience, programming or context constraints, and research and evidence.

3. Can a humanitarian organisation like the IRC introduce a standard system for collating, storing, and analysing data, as well as recording decision-making processes and course correction?

Most of the programme teams that piloted the Ground Truth methodology had different ways to review the feedback or use their existing (sometimes divergent) decision-making processes. When aiming to be responsive and ensure that client perspectives are given due weight and consideration in decision-making processes, should the IRC recommend a standardised system? If not, can humanitarian actors agree on and apply core principles of this aspect of the feedback cycle in any context with any system?

GROUND TRUTH PERSPECTIVE

It is essential for programme teams to feel ownership of the feedback process, including their own interest in listening, learning, and acting on feedback. While a large organisation can establish a system that covers feedback collection, analysis, and storage, it can be expensive and time consuming to implement, and could result in push back sometimes associated with change management. A better approach could be to establish a clear set of principles that field staff can use to guide efforts without constraint. This does not obviate the need for some level of oversight to ensure consequent behaviour, and an organisation's senior management has a role in providing the right incentives. Principles include open discussion of feedback within organisations and with the affected populations, and publication of results and findings. In addition, comparing feedback across programmes and over time, and documenting how the feedback is used to make changes, is equally important.

IRC PERSPECTIVE

Large organisations, such as the IRC, should certainly invest in systems to store information used to aid programme decision-making processes. The IRC invested in developing a system to store and manage available evidence on a wide range of subjects in support of the organisation's defined theories of change. The IRC is also developing a system for the management of quantitative monitoring and evaluation data. Seeking to elevate the perceived value of client perspectives alongside "evidence" and monitoring and evaluation data, we also recommend that better systems are developed for managing perceptual data from clients that is often qualitative information and harder to analyse, interpret and use to inform decisions.

The IRC is also interested in examining ways to systematise data presentation. Once those systems are in place, decision makers can easily reference data at specific levels of detail. For example, programme managers may require 'dashboard'-type information to know issues needing investigation with the relevant programme team, while the programme team may need more detailed information to know how to best address issues.

Humanitarian organisations need to invest in strengthening decision-making processes. Humanitarian organisations implementing feedback mechanisms often assume that, because client perspectives are captured that those perspectives will then inform programme decisions. This is not exactly the case; feedback processes need to be managed, encouraged, and rewarded. For decisions to be taken routinely, openly, and based on the relevant available information—including client perspectives—a number of factors are required, such as better inputs in the form of easily comprehended information for time-pressured decision makers; the incorporation of client data into routine project and management review meetings; and, most importantly, greater encouragement and accountability around the use of client perspectives.



Conclusion

The IRC–Ground Truth partnership has enriched the understanding of staff at both organisations regarding how to institutionalise client responsiveness in agencies. Yet, significant obstacles remain to responsiveness beyond the introduction of feedback mechanisms, standardised or otherwise. These obstacles include:

- How to improve communication flows within humanitarian organisations so that client perspectives reach the people who make response decisions
- How to improve the rigour and transparency of decision-making processes
- How to motivate and incentivise humanitarian organisation staff to want to be client responsive

These questions are discussed in the IRC's briefing paper, *Making the Case and Making the Difference: Strategies to Promote Client-Responsive Humanitarian Aid*, released as part of the July 2016 suite of client responsiveness learning products.

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IRC Client Voice and Choice Initiative and Ground Truth Solutions

Pilot Case Studies: Annex 1 Background to Client Responsiveness at the IRC

June 2016



IRC's Commitment to Client Responsiveness

In 2015, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) launched a bold new five-year strategy that, among a number of objectives, seeks to make the organisation more responsive to its clients, or people it serves. The organisation has committed to systematically and deliberately seeking the perspectives of its key stakeholders—clients and implementing partners—and to include those perspectives in decision-making processes regarding the type of programmes, and how and to whom, when, where and by whom to deliver said programmes. In doing so, the IRC believes that its programmes will become not only more responsive to the people it seeks to benefit, but also more effective.

The CVC Initiative

Becoming responsive means more than establishing feedback mechanisms; it requires being more effective at listening, being better at interpreting and understanding client perspectives when making decisions, and choosing courses of action that give those perspectives due weight and consideration. Becoming responsive means that IRC staff have the ability and the will be so, since becoming responsive requires wholesale change in the way that staff think and act.

The IRC established the Client Voice and Choice initiative (CVC) with a mandate to identify, test, and roll out an approach for the IRC to foster the development of greater organisational responsiveness by 2020.

Since 2015, CVC has sought to identify what does and does not work regarding methods for collecting and responding to client perspectives. CVC partnered with Ground Truth Solutions at Keystone Accountability to apply the Ground Truth methodology in refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) camps, rural areas, and urban centres focused on refugees, IDPs, and host communities in Greece, Kenya, South Sudan, and southern Syria. CVC met with colleagues from across field programmes, technical units, human resources, and senior management teams to better understand the barriers to and conditions that improve responsiveness. In addition, the CVC team organised a Learning Exchange in March 2016, bringing together IRC staff, major donors, implementing organisations, and policy-focused groups to discuss responsiveness approaches. Bringing all this learning together, CVC are developing an IRC Approach to Client Responsive Programming, which will aid country programmes—and those of other agencies—in implementing client responsive programming.

Why “Client”?

The IRC uses the term “client” in place of “beneficiary,” as “client” evokes a greater sense of personal agency instead of a more passive recipient of aid. The IRC’s use of “client” is deliberate, highlighting the limited power that many clients have over their lives and the IRC’s desire to help empower them.

The term “client” is most commonly used in the service industry in a market context, where the recipients of a service choose their service provider and can decide to stop using said certain provider if that provider fails to meet expectations. Many times, people that receive humanitarian aid do not have a choice regarding their service provider, nor can they necessarily refuse service if the quality of the service provided is unsatisfactory.

Finally, the word “beneficiary” assumes a benefit; it is erroneous to assume that clients always benefit from the IRC’s services. Instead, the IRC also seeks client perspectives to improve how it delivers services.

When is a Programme Considered 'Client Responsive'?

- Design: The IRC team integrates a client-responsive approach into programme design
- Capture: The IRC team selects and implements a combination of channels to effectively capture client perspectives
- Analysis and Interpretation: The IRC team analyses and interprets the implications of client perspectives
- Decision-Making: The IRC team systematically uses client perspectives in programme decision-making processes
- Action: The IRC team acts on the decisions taken about how to best respond to client perspectives
- Accountability and Improvement: The IRC team is accountable to its clients for its decisions and actions in response to their perspectives, and seeks continuous improvement regarding its responsiveness

For more information, see Annex. 3. Client Responsiveness Performance Matrix



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IRC Client Voice and Choice Initiative and Ground Truth Solutions

**Pilot Case Studies: Annex 2
Background to the Ground Truth Pilots**

June 2016



The IRC and Ground Truth Solutions

Ground Truth Solutions at Keystone Accountability have developed an approach to the implementation of the feedback cycle, which has the potential to benefit the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and allow the organisation to learn from Ground Truth's methods. Ground Truth uses targeted questions and facilitates feedback processes in order to reduce 'survey fatigue.' The questions are tailored to the particular programme and developed through workshops, which then provided the IRC with relevant, actionable information.

Key elements of the Ground Truth approach involve internal organisational discussion regarding the potential implications of client feedback, and external dialogue opportunities with clients to validate, further understand, and collectively develop solutions to the feedback hand-in-hand with clients. In addition, Ground Truth encourages communicating back to clients the feedback received and what is being done in response, thus improving accountability.

More information about Ground Truth is available on their website, [here](#).

CVC Pilot Implementation—Summary of Stages

Step 1 (approximately one-to-two weeks): The IRC's Client Voice and Choice (CVC) team familiarised the host country programme management and host project leads with what they could expect from the piloting process, including the benefit of participating in the pilot, timelines, budget, responsibilities, and deliverables.

Step 2 (approximately two-to-three weeks): The CVC team engaged the host country programme team to plan the field visit and design the client feedback and response mechanism. The host project leads completed a questionnaire summarising the host project, identifying the information they hoped to obtain from clients, and noting the factors that would influence the choice of feedback mechanism.

Step 3 (approximately one week): Field visit by Ground Truth and CVC to design the client feedback and response mechanism, covering:

- Additional information that the host project intends to obtain from clients
- The development, translation, testing, and refinement of questions to ask clients
- The identification of appropriate feedback collection methods and contracting external data collectors
- An agreed approach to analysis and dialogue concerning client feedback
- The finalisation of the timeline and responsibilities for data collection, analysis, and dialogue

Step 4 (approximately five-to-six weeks): Client feedback collected using the feedback method identified (one-to-two weeks). Ground Truth then analysed the feedback and passed the data and analysis back to the host project (one week). The host project arranged dialogue sessions with the client group according to the agreed approach (one week), considered possible course correction and, where relevant, implemented changes (ongoing).

Step 5 (approximately two-to-three weeks): Debrief—The CVC team reviewed the experience of designing and implementing the Ground Truth feedback mechanism, with the host project leads discussing the:

- Most and least challenging aspects
- Perceived benefits
- Challenges and barriers faced and potential ways to overcome them
- Lessons learned
- Best ways to sustain the feedback mechanism, or elements of it, or further develop other methods to promote client responsiveness

Learning Methodology

Pre-Pilot: CVC had the host project leads complete a questionnaire to better understand current methods of capturing client feedback and the areas the leads would like to explore through the pilot. CVC interviewed country programme management and key programme personnel using a semi-structured interview format to understand baseline levels of client responsiveness, and enabling and/or inhibiting factors.

During Pilot: CVC facilitated calls with the host project leads after each survey round, using a brief, semi-structured interview format to learn the areas that the feedback highlighted, including unknown issues or opportunities, affirmed assumptions, and areas to explore further through external dialogue sessions. The CVC team also revisited and adapted, as needed, the survey questions and report presentation. The host project leads reported back on the findings of the external dialogue sessions and course correction taken.

Post-Pilot: The CVC team had the host project leads complete a questionnaire reviewing their experience of implementing the Ground Truth approach, covering its benefit, the most and least challenging areas, and other key areas of learning. In preparing this case study, CVC and Ground Truth also reflected on their own experience of implementing the pilot.



IRC Client Voice and Choice Initiative and Ground Truth Solutions






Pilot Case Studies: Annex 3 Client Responsiveness Performance Matrix

June 2016



Client Responsiveness Performance Matrix

Stage 1 / Design	The IRC team integrates a client-responsive approach to programming into programme design
1	The IRC team identifies the channels through which it will capture the perspectives of its clients and integrates these channels into the implementation and management plan, budget and responsibilities of programme staff
2	The IRC team consults its clients on the channels that they prefer to share their perspectives with the IRC
3	The programme team identifies the business processes through which decisions will be taken by the programme team about how to respond to clients perspectives and integrates these business processes into the implementation and management plan, budget and responsibilities of programme staff
Stage 2: Capture	The IRC team selects and implements a combination of channels to effectively capture the perspectives of its clients
4	The IRC team routinely captures the perspectives of its clients through proactive channels (e.g. surveys, focus group discussions and interviews) in the design and throughout the implementation of the programme
5	The IRC team provides its clients with the opportunity to provide feedback or lodge complaints through reactive channels (e.g. suggestions boxes, hotlines and drop-in centre times) throughout the implementation of the programme
6	The IRC team systematically records the perspectives of its clients captured through day-to-day interaction in the field between programme staff and clients
Stage 3: Analysis and Interpretation	The IRC team analyses and interprets the implications of its clients' perspectives
7	The IRC team carefully and systematically analyses the perspectives of its clients and considers their implications for programming
Stage 4: Decision-Making	The IRC team systematically uses clients perspectives in programme decision making
8	The IRC team takes programming decisions which are informed by their clients perspectives
Stage 5: Action	The IRC team acts upon the decisions that it has taken about how to respond to its clients perspectives
9	The IRC team develops an action plan, including timing, budget and roles & responsibilities, for acting upon the decisions taken
10	The IRC team implements the action plan to specification, timing and budget
Stage 6: Accountability & Improvement	The IRC team is accountable to its clients for its decisions and actions in response to their perspectives and seeks continuous improvement to its responsiveness
11	The IRC team closes the loop with its clients to explain the decisions and actions taken within an appropriate amount of time following hearing their perspectives
12	The IRC team reviews with clients whether they feel that their perspectives have been taken into consideration and how the programme team can improve.
13	The IRC team takes remedial action to improve the way it communicates with its clients based on feedback

Grade		
Excellent		The programme team consistently exceeds expectations in all essential and desirable criteria. The overall quality of implementation across all stages was excellent.
Good		The programme team consistently meets expectations in all essential criteria. The overall quality of implementation across all stages was very good.
Satisfactory		The programme team does not consistently meet expectations in all essential criteria. The overall quality of implementation was good, with some need for improvement.
Poor		The programme team did not meet expectations across all the essential criteria. The overall quality of implementation was poor, with substantial need for improvement in multiple criteria.
Very Poor		The programme team did not meet expectations in any of the essential criteria. The overall quality of implementation was very poor, with substantial need for improvement across all criteria.