

Humanitarian Assistance and Resilience Programme Facility (HARP-F) COVID-19 Response Evaluation **Executive Summary**



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¹ Pseudonym

Executive Summary

Launched in 2016, the Humanitarian Assistance and Resilience Programme Facility (HARP-F) is the principal pillar of the UK's humanitarian assistance in Myanmar. It is responsible for disbursing and managing £61 million in grants² to organisations meeting the needs of people affected by conflict and natural disasters in Myanmar.

In February 2020, HARP-F drafted a COVID-19 response plan and started implementing specific support through their partners to support communities affected by the pandemic. This was prior to the government of Myanmar formally confirming the first case of COVID-19 on 23 March 2020.³

The HARP-F COVID-19 portfolio currently consists of 26 local and international NGOs providing goods and services valued at approximately £5 million to targeted populations in Rakhine State, Kachin State, northern Shan State (NSS), Chin State, southeast Myanmar and the Thai border area.⁴ HARP-F has focused their response to the pandemic by:

- i. working with partners to ensure that critical humanitarian assistance continues to be delivered safely and responsibly;
- ii. modifying existing grant agreements to enable grantees to focus on COVID-19 mitigation and preparedness; and
- iii. providing new grants to meet humanitarian needs during the pandemic.

In 2021, the COVID-19 response continued but it became more complicated following the military coup of 1 February. The post-coup operating context reset relationships between civil society and government and changed the external foreign policy and aid calculations of donor governments. Humanitarian support, including the COVID-19 response, is being reformulated to cope in a much more restricted operating environment.

An evaluation was commissioned to review HARP-F's COVID-19 response with a two-fold objective:

- i. elicit learning and make salient recommendations; and

²<https://www.crownagents.com/procurement-notice/humanitarian-and-resilience-programme-harp-facility-programming-in-hard-to-reach-areas/#:~:text=In%20its%20role%20as%20a%20funding%20mechanism%2C%20the,affected%20by%20conflict%20and%20natural%20disasters%20in%20M%20yanmar.>

³ As of 30 August 2021, the reported death toll attributed to COVID-19 is 15,287 persons with 395,883 persons recorded as being affected by the virus. Refer to <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/myanmar/> (accessed on 10 September 2021).

⁴ Evaluation Terms of Reference

- ii. use the findings, lessons and recommendations to strengthen best practices across the larger humanitarian community.

The evaluation reviewed core documentation provided by HARP-F and conducted interviews with grantees⁵, HARP-F staff and FCDO officials.

Below are the select key findings and recommendations.

Key Findings

Activation of the response

HARP-F's activation of its response to a swiftly evolving public-health crisis by mobilising existing grantees was relevant, being designed around community-based initiatives as well as the capacities and needs of CSOs. The multi-stakeholder approach was also both logical and effective. Furthermore, HARP-F's response was able to be implemented quickly as it was based principally upon quality relationships with pre-existing grantees. Responses to COVID-19 could be kick-started rapidly due to the strength of these existing partnerships as well as the use of localised networks enabling the deployment of existing funds already in partner bank accounts.

Coordination & the cluster system

HARP-F ensured coordination amongst grantees by use of the cluster-coordination system. The majority of grantees were not direct implementors but instead worked with local organisations. HARP-F's coordination with both grantees and local organisations in the communities helped to obtain greater credibility and broaden the scope of what the response could achieve. Timely coordination with all stakeholders both within and beyond communities is key to ensure relevance. Multi-stakeholder and inter-sectoral dialogue can further strengthen coordination and enhance the broadening of knowledge.

Communication

Quality working relationships, promptness and the use of informal communication channels engendered quick decision making. The "partnership relationships" between HARP-F and grantees promoted informality, the open flow of information and effective communication. Grantees would often refer to themselves as "partners" which suggests a relationship closer than that of a traditional relationship between donor and grantee. High staff turn-over at HARP-F in the early days concerned grantees but subsequent stability and introduction of focal persons was welcomed.

Duty of care

Duty of care has become more vital given the additional stress on staff and resilience required from communities. COVID-19 introduced a layer of uncertainty, change in patterns of work, an

⁵ The term "grantees" is used for purposes of reporting. During interviews "grantees" often referred to themselves as "partners", indicating a closer relationship. This aspect is addressed in the report itself as an important factor in the response.

overload of information and restrictions on movement. This places additional emphasis on staff wellbeing. Communities had to draw on individual, social and cultural resources to sustain themselves.

Localisation

HARP-F's localisation processes prior to and during the pandemic enhanced the response. Small organisations received mentorship and organisation development support. One such organisation in Rakhine State started their own project in early 2019 after being incubated. They independently received a project amendment and non-cost extension funds after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Myanmar. Mentorship and organisation development support such as this was planned during the inception of HARP-F and before COVID-19. This example shows the relevance of working with existing partners to accentuate success

Non-traditional networks of volunteers were utilised and progress was made in strengthening the capacity of these different groups and networks in the project areas. The delivery models selected by HARP-F utilising these informal networks functioned effectively and enhanced the delivery of aid and material to areas with restricted access. However, using such networks does raise policy and practical questions pertaining to risk, fund transfer modalities and reporting formats. A locally based focal person can play an important linking role with such local structures.

Flow of funding

Flow of funding was prompt. Most grantees were complimentary about HARP-F's flexibility and resourcefulness, even after the coup when transferring funds became more difficult.

Monitoring and mediation with FCDO

Monitoring is becoming more locally-led. Grantees also acknowledged HARP-F's intermediary role between them and FCDO as valuable. Partners were provided with access to a big picture analysis and overview without having to use up additional resources and time, allowing them to focus on delivery on the ground.

Planning for the Future

Planning for the future is uncertain but greater localisation is expected.

Recommendations

Strengthen and consolidate partnerships

HARP-F should develop a partnership consolidation process to further empower grantees. Funding procedures could also be simplified.

A mix of formal and informal communication can continue to be used, enabling more real-time information and decisions on funding.

Diversify activities

Expand coverage of activities and build upon existing partnerships.

Additionally, to provide continuity and sustained support, several partners reasoned that the work on COVID-19 responses should be integrated with current programming and mainstreamed.

Establish practical guidelines for public health communication

The promotion of behavioural change in communities should be sustained so to combat the `infodemic` – an onslaught of information, some inaccurate, much confusing – to help people make informed decisions and reduce mental strain. Humanitarian actors need to establish practical guidelines for public health and risk communication that is accessible, reliable, actionable and inclusive.

Create a robust ecosystem for localisation

It is important to understand that `localisation` is not merely prioritising funding to more local groups. Instead, it is about rebalancing the humanitarian system to ensure greater recognition and support is given to local actors. This therefore requires not just a change in system, but a change in mindset.

Besides being an intermediary for accountability of funds, HARP-F's grantees are already taking on field responsibilities and ownership of this particular response. This can be expanded upon. It is recommended to create an ecosystem based upon shared values and a common vision. This can incorporate building the capacity of local grantees and increasing the scope of shared accountability within the localization framework. The creation of such an ecosystem will demand a balance between task-shifting (for access to inaccessible areas) towards responsibility sharing (co-building operational models and systems between grantees and IPs.)

Focus on capacity building and training in an evolving crisis

Deliver to grantees and IPs additional training on diverse topics.

Re-evaluate accountability

The current crises have led local organisations with strong financial systems and proven track records to ask donors to consider unrestricted funds to enable them to respond faster. This

places stress on people and systems. It is recommended to conduct a broad-based conversation to address expectations within the confines of financial compliance with the goal of aligning accountability, monitoring and governance systems.

Develop a logical framework for monitoring & reporting

Develop a simplified logical framework as a guide for collective monitoring and reporting. It is important to have a shared understanding of outputs and outcomes, for example, “capacity development progress.”

Sustain an intermediary role

Intermediaries are nimble and can act as a fixer for the grantees and IPs to lobby with the authorities as well as define, drive and deliver humanitarian support on time and to intended crisis-affected persons. An intermediary function is therefore important and should be retained if or when HARP-F’s contract ends.

Expand coordination & collaboration

Field presence should be increased, working groups set-up and multi-stakeholder dialogue further supported. Inter-sectoral collaboration should be increased, particularly between HARP-F and entities that have a mandate to advocate for humanitarian policies at the international level such as UNHCR and the Red Cross.

Establish strategic regional advisory teams

Establish strategic regional advisory teams to undertake periodic missions. There should be adequate mechanisms to include CSOs and those working among ethnic populations and in conflict zones. This can help reduce tensions among stakeholders and build confidence in development agencies by using transition compacts and mutual accountability frameworks.

Clarify duty of care

Some local / smaller CSOs / CBOs interpret duty of care to include donors and related intermediaries engaging with the authorities on their behalf. It is vital that what duty of care does and does not include is clarified and communicated.