

# QUALITY FUNDING FOR RESPONSES BY LOCAL HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

Experience from the ELNHA Humanitarian Response Grant Facility



This brief describes lessons learned from a humanitarian funding mechanism to local actors, tested in the Project Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors (ELNHA). The ELNHA Project focuses on strengthening the role of local and national humanitarian actors in disaster-affected Uganda and Bangladesh. Working with a wide range of stakeholders, the Project applies a systems approach to achieve the

envisioned change: it strengthens the capacity of local actors, gives them a voice in determining the humanitarian agenda, and supports a change in ways of working by international humanitarian donors and INGOs. These lessons are intended for practitioners in the humanitarian field and organizations that would like to implement similar activities.



**OXFAM**

## INTRODUCTION

Oxfam believes in a new humanitarian model in which local and national humanitarian actors are responsible for, and lead, humanitarian action in their contexts. With funding from Ikea Foundation, the three-year Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors (ELNHA) Project, has been able to establish, trial and review a funding mechanism to support local and national NGOs to take on greater leadership roles in responding to emergencies in their communities.

This mechanism, **the Humanitarian Response Grant Facility (HRGF)** and how it evolved over the first two years of implementation, tells an important story about how funding opportunities can not only support, but drive, diverse local and national actors to be more equipped and better positioned to lead humanitarian responses. The HRGF is aligned with Oxfam's commitments to increase the levels of humanitarian funding accessible to local and national organisations and better share power and responsibility (see Grand Bargain and Charter for Change commitments).

This document aims to contribute to the localization of aid debate by sharing ELNHA's learnings on the "How" of putting humanitarian reform commitments into action. We hope that the learning from ELNHA's piloting of this mechanism can inspire and inform the development of similar initiatives in other contexts. The learning provided in this document is derived from two years of implementing the HRGF in Uganda and Bangladesh.



We do apply for humanitarian funding here and there (e.g. to embassies), but we experience little luck on our own as LNGO, and seldom receive a feed-back why our proposals are not accepted.

— NDDP, Sirajganj District, Bangladesh

## THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE GRANT FACILITY – WHAT DOES IT DO

The **HRGF** was created in 2016 to fund local and national NGOs to lead humanitarian responses to emergencies in their contexts. The facility promotes leadership of local and national humanitarian actors, by providing the opportunity to access funding to:

- **Strengthen their capacity** to independently design and implement quality responses, including conducting needs assessments, designing project proposals, managing funds, monitoring and evaluating the responses, and meeting reporting compliance requirements;

- **Demonstrate their capacity** to independently design and manage quality response programs, with the aim to increase direct access to other sources of funding (national and international) – for the same response and/or for future responses;
- **Provide learning to the wider humanitarian community** on funding modalities that meet both objectives of enabling quality responses as well as facilitating leadership of local actors;

The amounts allocated and the timeline for each funded response varied depending on the context and organizational capacity of grantees.

## LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR THE HRGF

1. The HRGF has been tested in two countries with very different operating environments (Uganda and Bangladesh). Within these, districts were selected that were prone to natural or man-made disasters- Uganda mainly responded to the South-Sudanese refugee crisis and Bangladesh to seasonal flooding;
2. Local and national non-governmental organizations operating in these districts were invited to respond to an expression of interest to become eligible for funding through the HRGF. This allowed the ELNHA team to map organisations in the districts interested to participate in humanitarian response work. From the mapping, organizations were pre-qualified for eligibility to the HRGF. Pre-qualification was based on 1) statement of humanitarian commitment, track record, current capacity; and 2) a due diligence process (e.g. legal and registration information; financial and procurement systems, technical capacity, etc);
3. Organizations not-selected were provided written feedback on their proposal, providing information on the reasons why they were not selected, and offering recommendations for improvement; additionally, they were included in a database for possible future engagement in capacity development, with the possibility to apply for the Grant in a future occasion. For pre-selected organizations, specific training was conducted in proposal development, budgeting, reporting, and quality standards. Where necessary, Oxfam identified technical advisers who could be made available to support organisations during the implementation period. Their role during implementation was to support participating NGOs with on-the-job training and quality assurance.

## REFLECTIONS

The groundwork for establishing the HRGF was slightly different in the two countries, especially around the

call for expressions of interest. A public call allowed the ELNHA team and stakeholders in Uganda to generate a useful mapping of local actors interested and capable to engage in humanitarian response work. The public call was reasonable in Uganda because of the relatively small pool of organizations with a humanitarian track record. Alternatively, Bangladesh restricted the call to the affected districts, to be able to manage the number of responses.

Based on the experiences gained so far, the recommended approach is:

- Conduct a public call for expressions of interest, if suitable to the context and resulting value; this allows to map who is there in the sector;
- Generate a selection of pre-qualified organisations to fast-track the process of proposal selection;
- Conduct a periodic re-mapping of local actors interested in engaging in response work, e.g. every year, depending on the number of calls sent out;

*(full details about the process are available in the accompanying Annexe)*



Test FGD in Sunamganj district, Bangladesh on 4 October 2017. Monira Khanam, an ELNHA staff member of DAM, is facilitating the discussion

## ACTIVATING THE GRANT FACILITY

1. The HRGF is activated when a humanitarian crisis occurs in the selected districts. Oxfam then calls for proposals among the pre-qualified actors on a competitive basis;
2. Half-day informal sessions are organized to introduce and discuss the required templates and process with interested pre-qualified organisations. For fast-onset crises it is more suitable to introduce this session before the call is sent out; in either case it is important to dedicate time to provide information, and review the formats and criteria with potential grantees, to ensure a higher quality of proposals;
3. Interested organisations submit Proposals in the prescribed format;
4. A Committee, comprised of Oxfam staff, evaluates and shortlists proposals, and provides feedback on those

5. that are rejected as well as those shortlisted;
5. Successful grantees enter into a contractual agreement with Oxfam;
6. If needed, support is given to organisations by Oxfam staff during the implementation phase according to their specific requirements (identified by ongoing contact/ monitoring);
7. After completion of response activities, Oxfam staff organises a learning review with the participating organisations, to review the implementation experience and identify improvements for future responses. Time permitting, the learning review can include a day of field visits, in which organizations learn from each other's work and jointly reflect on ways forward. This is also a time to invite other potential donors, to witness the work done by the grantees, and establish linkages for future funding from other sources;

## REFLECTIONS

**On proposal formats:** Formats were standard, requesting sufficient information to be able to make a sound evaluation of the responses proposed. Although there is a global push to simplify donor formats and reporting requirements, it was decided not to do this, because local organizations, at least in the short to medium term, had to acquaint themselves to the practices that were currently being applied, if they wanted to access funding from other sources. The HRGF allowed them to practice, get feedback and receive training to strengthen their capacity on proposal writing and compliance.

**On selection committee:** When deciding how to design the selection committee for proposals, there was interest in including local actors on the committees to ensure transparency and ownership to district level stakeholders. It was however decided against this in realization of the highly competitive dynamics present among local actors. Local actors themselves expressed a preference for a committee composed of staff from an international organization, as they regarded it to be more transparent and neutral.

**On contractual agreements:** contractual agreements were no different than those drafted for other projects and activities. Changing the contracting would have required organizational approvals that did not fit the timeline and resources available for this intervention. It is however an aspect that is important to review, to ensure that the contracting is balanced towards more equitable partnership.

*(templates for Expression of Interest, Proposals, and Progress Reports are available in the accompanying Annexe)*

## FACTS & FIGURES

In total, between July 2016 and September 2017, Oxfam allocated grants to 15 organisations across the two

countries, for a total amount of approx. 830,000euros.

Details of the responses are available in the table below.

BANGLADESH					
HRGF Round	Time line	Partner Name	District	# of Beneficiary (HH) Reached	Main Activities
1	Sep-Nov '16	GKS Foundation	Sirajganj	1,625	Cash Transfer, WASH
1	Sep-Nov '16	SKS Foundation	Gaibandha	1,600	Cash Transfer, WASH
1	Sep-Nov '16	Zibika	Kurigram	10,500	WASH, NFI
2	Jun-Aug '17	Haor Consortium	Sunamganj & Kishoreganj	17,500	Cash Transfer
3	Aug-Oct '17	GUK	Kurigram	5,000	Cash Transfer, NFI
3	Aug-Oct '17	MMS Consortium	Sirajganj	4,030	Cash Transfer, NFI
3	Sep-Nov '17	RDRS	Gaibandha	4,900	Cash Transfer
<b>Total</b>				<b>45,155</b>	

UGANDA					
HRGF Round	Time line	Partner Name	District	# of Beneficiary (HH) Reached	Main Activities
1	Dec '16-Feb '17	Vedco Consortium	Lamwo	5,897	WASH and GBV
1	Dec '16-Feb '17	PAG	Arua (Rhino camp)	2,185	WASH
1	Dec '16-Feb '17	CEFORD	Yumbe (Bidibidi)	8,234	ESVL
1	Jun-Aug '17	URDMC	Yumbe (Bidibidi)	187	ESVL and GBV
1	Aug-Oct '17	KAPDA	Karamoja	3,600	WASH and social protection
2	Apr-Sept '17	SORUDA	Lamwo (Palabek)	2,800	EFSVL for both the host and refugees
2	Apr-Sept '17	ADP	Kotido (Nakapelimoru)	550	EFSVL (Food Voucher)
2	Apr-Sept '17	KAPDA consortium	Kaabong	1,269	Protection, WASH and EFSVL
2	Apr-Sept '17	PAG	Arua (Rhino camp)	1,200	WASH & PSNs support
2	Apr-Sept '17	VEDCO	Lamwo (Palabek)	2,894	WASH
2	Apr-Sept '17	URDMC	Yumbe (Bidibidi)	90	EFSVL (youth Income Generation Activities)
2	Apr-Sept '17	URDMC	Yumbe (Bidibidi)	400	GBV
2	Apr-Sept '17	AWAYD	Yumbe (Bidibidi)	12,548	Gender and Protection
<b>Total</b>				<b>21,751</b>	



## WHAT HAVE WE BEEN LEARNING?

In mid-2017, Oxfam commissioned an independent review of the HRGF mechanism – specifically examining appropriateness of the process, timeliness and speed, the quality of feedback, transparency of the selection process, and the manner in which the HRGF processes and procedures enabled the grantees to collaborate. The main lessons are discussed below.

### **This funding mechanism is popular with participating organisations:**

Overall, the grant facility was enthusiastically endorsed by all the participating organisations. It built their confidence to be able to respond and created a sense of ownership for leading emergency response in their contexts. The grant facility was both innovative and highly necessary. We think it has enormous potential to be replicated elsewhere and would encourage other INGOs to implement similar initiatives.



#### **Learning by Doing:**

The HRGF process of proposal formulation, planning, discussion and negotiation is seen by many grantees as one of the biggest learning points of the programme, even more than implementation itself – source: HRGF Review)

**Adapt the process to the specific context:** The funding mechanism's grant parameters such as time frames, amount of funding and requested activities should remain flexible to the extent that they can fit the technical strengths of the individual organizations and the response. Where existing capacity and experience are low, the focus needs to be on technical capacity strengthening and support provided to local and national non-governmental organizations, to plan and deliver good quality responses. Where the existing capacity and experience are higher, more emphasis can be given to preparing organisations to access direct donor funding in future, or to supporting the further development of their influencing capabilities to access funding. Smaller organisations, who may not have sufficient capacity to respond on their own, can be encouraged to apply in consortia.



#### **Advantages for local NGOs in applying to the HRGF as a consortium:**

As a consortium we were fast as each organization could work simultaneously in their different locations so overall we were faster. We reached the most remote areas, together we had a bigger outreach.

### **Engage the grantees to lead the review of their responses:**

The ELNHA project facilitated light touch, modified "real time reviews" (RTR) of HRGF-funded responses. Real Time Reviews are an Oxfam monitoring, evaluation and learning methodology, which takes place 6 weeks into a response, to support the quality of responses. The methodology has been adapted to be used by, and contribute to, local actor leadership. Key to such an 'RTR Lite' is joint reflection and definition among local actors of 'what is a quality response' and what indicators will be relevant in each specific context and provides an opportunity for staff from different organisations operating in the domestic humanitarian sector to share experiences, challenges and opportunities. A package has been developed for local actors (and others) to use the methodology independently (link is available below).

### **Be prepared to give space and not interfere:**

During the period of implementing response grant funds, some of the partners would ask Oxfam to support. Depending on the context, Oxfam's decision to let organizations find solutions themselves was an important part of the learning, as it triggered organizations to become more resourceful and, in some cases, opt for consortia and collaboration among local actors to leverage on each other's strengths.



#### **Zibika Director at the HRGF 1st Call Learning session:**

We feel empowered as humanitarian leaders although I strongly believe we still need capacity building support. Of course, we had previous experience in bidding, but now we are confident that we can even implement short duration emergency projects. Although the grant was a small and we faced a lot of practical challenges along with minimal supervision or assistance from Oxfam, we have successfully engaged the local government throughout the implementation process.

### **Provide space for capacity development and learning:**

The approach is entirely based on facilitating 'learning by doing'. This learning process starts at the application phase, both for organizations that eventually receive a grant and for those not awarded grants. Organizations are offered capacity building support on proposal writing, the grant facility's process and wider funding strategies, but also on project implementation and financial management.

- Capacity development activities that are closely linked to opportunities to access funding for response, are a high motivator for organizations, increasing absorption and commitment to learning;

- With the HRGF it is possible to measure improvement in responses by local actors, with each new call;

**Striking the right balance in taking risks:** The HRGF review revealed that longer time frames and larger amounts of money would tangibly benefit the grantees, giving a more viable time-frame to set things up, get things going, and maximising the time for improving and learning. The HRGF design was cautious in the pilot phase to mitigate financial risks. Similarly, donors may be tempted to limit their own financial and reputational risks by only giving small grants for short responses; however, review of the HRGF-funded responses reinforces recommendations for longer time frames, larger amounts of money and more flexible grant parameters to fit the individual technical needs of the programme. Failure to do so could risk responses of poor quality, or responses that do not sufficiently address the needs and expectations of the communities. In addition to the immediate implications for the response, underinvestment potentially can affect the organisational reputation of both the grantees and the grant-maker and may also have a wider impact on the localisation agenda, with other INGOs and donors becoming less willing to give more responsibilities and space to local actors.



Enumerators Brenda and Egabe conducting the FGD in August 2017 in West Nile region, Uganda

**Prioritise mentoring and resource it well:** Agencies which disburse the grants need to be prepared to provide technical support if it is needed. Every grantee organisation will be different with different capacities and challenges, and tailored mentoring during the implementation was seen to be highly effective. Grantees can request this support, by writing technical expert time in their proposal budget or by having a Partner-Oxfam agreement on deployment of an Oxfam (or other) staff for on-the-job support and mentoring. This approach not only enhanced local organisations' ability to respond but also increased their confidence to do so and to assert themselves within the wider humanitarian arena.

**Identify funding opportunities for local actors beyond the HRGF:** the HRGF is limited in its capacity to fund responses; its purpose is more to provide a stepping stone for local and national organisations to access other funding (such as country-based pooled funds and direct donor funding). There is thus a role to play for the organization providing the grants, to increase access for local actors to sources humanitarian funding, e.g. by jointly developing an influencing strategy with local actors or providing spaces for engagement and interaction among stakeholders (for example, donors were invited to attend the learning review which takes place after each HRGF response, to witness the work that LINGOs have done, and learn from the approach used).

### USEFUL ADDITIONAL RESOURCES/TEMPLATES

- [Guidelines](#) for the HRGF
- [RTR Lite](#) Package
- [Video](#) on the Haor Consortium response

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