

Guidance Note

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REDUCING PARTNER RISKS IN MYANMAR

Background

As donors and international response actors have sought to pivot to more flexible, remotely delivered programming to meet exponentially escalating needs across Myanmar since the 2021 coup, they have strived to reduce administrative burdens on local actors while avoiding an escalation of risks at any level of their operations. Despite best efforts, measures implemented during this period have not proven to be a perfect fix for the challenges implementing actors face. This disconnect is rooted in a simple, but unavoidable, reality: crisis environments are highly volatile; there are no one-size-fits-all solutions, and what works today in one project area may not work there tomorrow — and may *never* work in other target geographies.

One example of a tactic deployed quickly and widely in Myanmar to reduce partners' security risks was the waiver of contractual requirements that partners conserve and submit physical receipts and hard copies of other relevant documents throughout project cycles. Although few donors in Myanmar still require original receipts or hard copies of paperwork, this analytical unit regularly receives complaints from local response actors struggling to protect and preserve physical project documents. In certain active conflict areas, where local responders are among those regularly displaced from their homes, response actors still go to tremendous lengths to keep project documentation safe. Responders in such areas report that, at the first warning that SAC troops are heading to their areas — while their family members prepare

food and clothing to flee — they themselves must take time to wrap project paperwork in plastic and bury it in the ground away from their residences — in locations where it would be unlikely to be traced immediately to them if discovered. Once the paperwork is buried, they flee with their families, hoping that the documents — not to mention their homes — will still be there when it is safe to return. Hearing such stories, donors that no longer require original receipts or physical paperwork tend to ask the same question: why is this still happening?

The answer is that Myanmar is an extremely dangerous, volatile environment for response actors and there simply is no simple ‘fix’ to eliminate the risks faced by local responders. Donors tend to no longer require *original* receipts or supporting documents, but they do still require soft copies. This is unlikely to change; for many donors, it would be extremely difficult to lift all such requirements and still comply with their national laws governing the expenditure of public funds. In a perfect world, a shift to soft copy documentation would allow donors to comply with national and international regulations, while enabling responders to photograph necessary paperwork, securely upload it, and immediately delete any local copy of the photograph from their phones or electronic devices. Indeed, in certain border areas and other locations with fast and functional communications networks, the system works exactly like this.

However, as a whole, the Myanmar response landscape is quite far from a ‘perfect world’ scenario. In many locations, mobile networks and internet access are slow and intermittently available at best; in certain crisis-affected areas, they are functionally nonexistent. Although quick, cloud-based solutions are thus out of reach for many responders, checkpoints and SAC troops do tend to be quite plentiful in many of their project areas. Whether at checkpoints or elsewhere, civilians’ electronic devices are routinely searched, seized and destroyed during their interactions with SAC personnel — and, less frequently, the same is true with respect to civilian interactions with other armed actors. Civilians are also routinely subjected to detention, abuse or other mistreatment on the basis of what is found on their devices. In consequence, many response actors understandably avoid keeping any project-related photographs or files on their phones, tablets and computers. From their standpoint, in the high-risk environments where they live and work, the preservation of digital project documentation would place them in even greater danger than the preservation of paper copies.

Risk Mapping, Management and Mitigation

Within Myanmar’s fluid set of overlapping crises and conflicts, an expanded emphasis on localisation can help donors and INGOs ensure programming implementation and reporting methodologies are as closely tailored as possible to the particular contexts in which they are operating. There are three basic steps donors and INGOs can take to enhance their localisation efforts and ensure that contextual realities and the needs of partners and beneficiaries inform every stage of project design and implementation. First, they can improve communication with their partners, beneficiaries and local actors to ensure they are appropriately mapping risks and operational realities in their project areas. Second, they can work to

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coordinate more closely and effectively with partners to develop and implement appropriate strategies to manage risks. Finally, donors and INGOs can collaborate with partners to develop and deploy more secure tools to support their safe operations.

By engaging more closely with partners, beneficiaries, and key stakeholders, donors and INGOs can better understand, plan for, and help reduce the risks their partners and beneficiaries face. In turn, they will be able to deliver programmes in a way that is as context-appropriate and conflict-sensitive as possible across the extremely diverse, constantly changing, Myanmar landscape.

COMMUNICATION: RISK MAPPING

Strategies for continuous, clear communication with local stakeholders can serve as a foundation to help international actors ensure they maintain an accurate real-time understanding of operational risks. Steady, open communications can help international actors consistently learn from and adapt to the challenges faced by the response actors who are shouldering most of the crisis response burden across Myanmar. Because local responders and their families are experiencing firsthand the impacts of the country's complex crises — all while they are trying to remain safe and address overwhelming needs within their communities — it is unlikely responders have extra bandwidth to seek to improve communications with donors and INGOs. For this reason, the responsibility rests with international response actors to improve communications channels to ensure they are getting timely, continuous feedback from local actors to inform rolling adjustments to improve the safety, quality and impact of the programmes they support.

To improve communication with partners and members of target affected communities, donors and INGOs can ask existing partners what would make it easier for them to share information and concerns quickly. Partners could suggest stepping away from formal communication channels towards new, secure, data-light messaging platforms or identifying new communications focal points within donor, INGO and partner organisations. Both low tech and high tech measures could help to improve communications. On the low tech end of the spectrum, international actors can redouble efforts to ensure their own teams are as highly localised as possible. By actively recruiting and working directly with members of affected populations, international entities can gain highly localised expertise and open new formal and informal communication channels to target communities. By employing focal points from project areas, international actors can help eliminate the linguistic and cultural barriers between their own organisations and the communities they seek to support. On the high tech end of the spectrum, international actors can invest in new tools and platforms to solicit and interpret input from partners and communities. These can include the development of tech solutions that do not require local actors to access high-speed internet or communicate in English or Myanmar languages in order to share timely feedback with donors and INGOs.

COORDINATION: RISK MANAGEMENT

Once donors and INGOs attain a more accurate understanding of the risks their partners face, they can coordinate with their partners to take steps to ensure international actors are actively trying to share the burden of risk with those implementing projects. For example, if there appears to be a high risk that project documentation could be lost or could be extremely difficult to bring out of project areas — as in the example above in 'Background' — donors and INGOs could take action to anticipate and mitigate the impact of loss or delay in

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delivery of project documents. One potential step to better manage these risks could be for donors and INGOs to extend reporting deadlines to provide partners a wider window to try to safely deliver project paperwork. Another could be to build in contingency budget lines to try to allow partners to make up for any losses incurred from ‘ineligible costs’ due to documentation that is seized, lost, destroyed, or otherwise rendered unavailable as a result of the challenging circumstances in which they work.

COLLABORATION: RISK MITIGATION

Finally, in addition to helping partners shoulder the weight of project risks, donors and INGOs can proactively support their partners with the development and provision of tools to reduce known operating risks. In close consultation with partners and based on a clear understanding of their needs and challenges, donors can allocate additional resources to projects to cover a range of innovative support measures. Such measures could include the provision of funds to cover the costs of improving network access in project areas, to allow for faster and more secure communications and project document uploads. Donors could also provide financial resources for INGOs commission technical experts to develop other tech solutions, such as secure communications platforms and encryption tools, to facilitate the more timely sharing of information and documents as well as the more secure and clandestine storage of sensitive materials on device hard drives prior to upload. Donors and INGOs can also support their partners with the provision of digital and physical security training tailored to their particular needs.

Final recommendations

To reduce operational risks and ensure programmes are as impactful as possible, international actors should expand and enhance their localisation efforts. In practice, this entails focussing on three main areas:

COMMUNICATION: RISK MAPPING

1. **Consult with partners** to understand what would make it easier for them to communicate quickly and clearly with donors and INGOs;
2. **Identify and use communications channels that are more accessible to partners**, including by moving from formal channels to data-light, informal channels;
3. **Reduce language and cultural barriers to effective communication**, by investing in human resources and technological solutions that eliminate obstacles and open up new channels for effective communication.

COORDINATION: RISK MANAGEMENT

1. **Share the burden of risk with implementing partners** by better anticipating challenges, including those caused by delayed or destroyed project documentation. Consider extending project reporting deadlines, easing documentation requirements, and budgeting to cover the potential expense of ‘ineligible costs’ due to documentation challenges.

COLLABORATION: RISK MITIGATION

1. Proactively support partners with the development and provision of tools to reduce known operating risks, including by:
 - a. Providing partners with financial and technical support to improve network connectivity;
 - b. Providing financial and technical support to enable partners to conserve soft copies of project documents more securely and discretely on their electronic devices;
 - c. Investing in the development of more secure and accessible communications platforms and encryption tools for partners to use;
 - d. Facilitating the provision of context-appropriate digital and physical security training for partners.

Guidance Note

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