

Guidance Note

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STRATEGIES FOR REMOTE RESPONSE RISK REDUCTION

Background

As international response actors have grappled to adapt to an environment of highly constricted physical access in post-coup Myanmar, remote programming modalities – heavily reliant on chains of implementing partners, sub-partners, informal response actors, and volunteers – have become the norm to implement activities and provide assistance across project areas. This shift to remote programming has, in most cases, been highly effective; in addition to localization being an important objective in and of itself, local actors have considerably more access and freedom to operate on the ground than international organisations. However, from a donor perspective, each tier of separation between a project lead and the person actually delivering aid can generate new risks and compound existing ones; each unknown or downstream actor is one degree further away from contractual responsibility with respect to any given project; when responders are more removed from contractual obligations, and when they tend to operate with less formal organisational structures, they may be less likely to have been provided with training on key aspects of humanitarian interventions in line with best practices and international standards. For example, in their first days and weeks delivering assistance in a crisis, new village-level volunteers are likely to have focused exclusively on delivering emergency assistance where it is needed, rather than on seeking out training on anti-corruption practices, do no harm, or the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. On a practical level, this prioritisation of immediate needs is entirely

understandable (and again, is highly effective in most emergency contexts). At the same time, the longer improvised, ‘quick-and-dirty’ approach to interventions continues, and as direct visibility over activities decreases due to the multilayered nature of remote programming structures, the more the risks of fraud, aid diversion, financial misconduct, sexual exploitation and abuse, and other harmful conduct taking place within the scope of projects can rise as potential issues. From a donor perspective, these risks tend to appear higher with each level of decreased visibility, access, and direct project oversight.

Mitigation measures

To reduce their degree of risk with respect to potential programme-related misconduct, donors and INGOs have several options at their disposal. Two basic, complementary strategies are: (1) to develop greater trust in downstream partners and volunteers; (2) to increase donor and INGO visibility over downstream partners and volunteers. Essentially, for donors and INGOs, this means developing a better understanding of the actors with whom they are working, and gaining a clearer picture of what these actors are doing. To ensure they can trust those implementing activities at the most local level, donors and INGOs can take several steps to reduce risk and bolster local actors’ capacity with respect to best practices and international standards. To do this, donors and INGOs could conduct or support their partners in conducting vetting of local volunteers; likewise, they could provide downstream implementers with simplified training modules to teach volunteers and new responders about key best practices and international standards. At the same time, on their end, donors and INGOs can adapt existing programme monitoring approaches to afford themselves greater visibility over project implementation across target areas. This could involve a mix of remote monitoring techniques or the addition of third party monitoring to provide additional clarity with respect to project activities.

VETTING VOLUNTEERS

By requiring the vetting of local volunteers, donors and INGOs can attain greater insight as to whom, exactly, they are working with, and they can ensure that high-risk individuals are not responsible for project implementation. To ensure that volunteers undergo basic screening prior to taking part in project activities, donors can request that INGO partners, or their high-capacity subpartners, conduct basic vetting of local volunteers and all those involved in the delivery of assistance and project activities. This can help ensure that individuals are barred from project participation if they have been involved in past criminal activity, or are otherwise suspected to have perpetrated abuse upon others, or have close ties to sanctioned or potentially criminal enterprises or individuals. Vetting is not a perfect solution to eliminate the risk of misconduct in projects, but it can substantially reduce risks both by screening out high-risk individuals and communicating to downstream partners that all forms of misconduct are to be taken seriously and prevented to the maximum extent possible.

Measures to implement vetting can vary across contexts and implementing areas. Based on the local conditions — for example, whether there is internet access or phone signal, whether all members of a displaced community are from the same area of origin or not, etc. — simplified vetting procedures can be set up to quickly provide a basic screening mechanism for volunteers looking to engage in project activities. At its simplest, vetting involves using a combination of available sources of information (whether human, media, social media, public record, etc.) to determine whether an individual has (or appears to have) personal connections of concern or prior involvement in past misconduct. Based on vetting findings, implementing actors can decide whether to work with a potential volunteer, seek further information before working with a candidate, or decline to work with that individual. Donors and INGOs can support downstream partners in setting up vetting processes and decision protocols to make better informed choices about whom to trust and engage with at the most local levels.

SIMPLIFIED TRAINING MODULES

Donors and INGOs can also prepare simplified training modules and share these with partners to facilitate their delivery of ‘crash course’ humanitarian capacity building of local volunteers and implementers. Training modules can cover topics such as: safeguarding; prevention, identification and reporting of financial misconduct; prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse; do no harm; inclusion of vulnerable and minority communities; and/or other relevant issues of concern. Simplified training modules can be prepared in local languages using non-technical vocabulary to ease comprehension and reduce the time necessary for effective delivery. Precise training methods can vary based on particular circumstances, and tools should be developed to suit the needs and operating conditions of local responders.

PROGRAMME MONITORING

Direct donor and INGO monitoring of programmes is difficult in any context where international responders rely heavily on remote programming modalities. In Myanmar, physical access to project sites is heavily restricted, highly dangerous, and often ultimately impossible for international actors. In such situations, monitoring tools must be adapted to the challenges of the context, to ensure that donors and INGOs have visibility over the projects they are funding and implementing, despite their physical distance from the delivery of assistance. INGOs can deploy remote monitoring methodologies to increase their visibility of projects where they lack physical access. Likewise, donors can support the monitoring efforts of their INGO partners and reduce the financial and technical burden on partners by commissioning third party monitoring (TPM) from outside actors. TPM can help INGOs and donors increase their understanding of project activities, improve their awareness of challenges faced by local responders, and allow them to adapt interventions to better suit evolving crises. By receiving information from outside actors, INGOs can become equipped with valuable information to inform programming decisions without expending more of their limited project resources or taking on a greater administrative burden themselves.

Final recommendations

To reduce risks in the manner best suited to the contexts in which they are operating, donors and INGOs should consult closely with their partners and downstream implementing actors. This can help provide them with a more clear picture of precisely which tools would be most useful to support partners in efforts to reduce risks while affording donors and INGOs themselves greater visibility and better understanding with respect to the projects they are supporting. Three potential strategies for remote response risk reduction include:

(1) Vetting of Volunteers:

Donors and INGOs can support local partners with the development and implementation of vetting processes to try to reduce the risk of misconduct among volunteers delivering assistance and conducting activities within vulnerable communities.

(2) Simplified Training Modules:

Donors and INGOs can provide or fund the development of simplified training modules to ensure local partners are able to quickly and easily deliver effective humanitarian training on key issues to new volunteers and implementing actors.

(3) Programme Monitoring:

Donors and INGOs can adapt project monitoring methodologies to better fit within the context of a remote response, affording themselves better visibility over projects and ensuring that they and local partners receive timely information to inform project-related decisions to ensure interventions remain tailored to the needs of vulnerable communities.

Guidance Note

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