
SWAN Evaluation

Comparative review of Rapid Response

Mechanisms in Ethiopia

A discussion paper

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Table of contents

List of abbreviations	iii
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Background.....	1
1.2 Methodology and limitations.....	1
2 A patchwork of HRMs.....	3
2.1 Mechanisms covered by the review	3
2.2 Mechanisms created and adapted to fill gaps	4
3 Factors influencing stronger and weaker HRM responses.....	5
3.1 Components of more successful rapid response interventions.....	5
3.2 Common shortcomings across Ethiopia’s HRMs.....	9
4 Future response mechanisms: architecture, common shortcomings, and programme choices.....	13
Annex A Terms of Reference – comparative review	16
Annex B List of respondents	21

List of abbreviations

BHA	Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs
DG	Directorate General
ECHO	European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
EHF	Ethiopian Humanitarian Fund
ERM	Emergency Response Mechanism
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HRM	Humanitarian Response Mechanisms
ICCG	Inter-Cluster Coordination Group
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
FCDO	UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
NFI	Non-Food Item
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OPM	Oxford Policy Management
RRF	Rapid Response Fund
RRM	Rapid Response Mechanism
RRM/P	Rapid Response Mechanism/Protection
SCI	Save the Children International
SWAN	Save the Children, World Vision International, Action Against Hunger, and the Norwegian Refugee Council
UN	United Nations
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

USAID United States Agency for International Development

WASH Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

This discussion note accompanies the findings for the evaluation of SWAN—*Provision of Essential Humanitarian Supplies of Health, Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), and Emergency Shelter (ES) and Non-Food Items (NFIs) Through Timely and Cost-Effective Procurement and Response Mechanism* (‘the SWAN project’). SWAN is being implemented in Ethiopia by a consortium of four international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (the ‘SWAN consortium’): **S**ave the Children International (SCI), **W**orld Vision International, **A**ction Against Hunger, and the **N**orwegian Refugee Council (NRC).

Oxford Policy Management (OPM) was commissioned to undertake the evaluation by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) on behalf of the Ethiopian Humanitarian Fund (EHF) Advisory Board.

The scope of the evaluation covers the period between March 2019 and October 2020 and has two overarching intentions: to assess to what extent the SWAN consortium has been an effective humanitarian response mechanism (HRM)¹ as part of the wider humanitarian response; and to assess to what extent the approach undertaken by the SWAN consortium partners has been appropriate.

This review has been carried out as a separate companion exercise to the independent evaluation of SWAN. The purpose of the review is to consider how other HRMs compare to SWAN in the areas covered by the evaluation, specifically on coordination and collaboration; on timeliness and effectiveness; on value for money; on integrating protection and do-no-harm principles; and on exit strategies and contributions to sustainability.

The overall objective of the review is to provide a discussion paper for FCDO and other humanitarian stakeholders in Ethiopia as they consider the overall architecture of HRMs in Ethiopia, including future funding and support decisions.²

1.2 Methodology and limitations

The review focused on four HRMs operating in Ethiopia: the Emergency Response Mechanism (ERM), the Rapid Response Fund (RRF), the Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM), and the RRM/Protection (RRM/P). A number of respondents also commented on two other mechanisms: EHF (technically a funding mechanism rather than a response mechanism) and the United Nations (UN) Children’s Fund (UNICEF)-managed, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH)-focused RRM (RRM/UNICEF).

Unlike the comprehensive SWAN evaluation, this review is based solely on a rapid review of available documentation on the four mechanisms and on interviews with a limited number of

¹ Normally referred to as Rapid Response Mechanisms (RRMs) in Ethiopia, the abbreviation ‘HRM’ is used to avoid confusion with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded RRM.

² See Annex A for the Terms of Reference of the review.

key stakeholders involved with those mechanisms. Apart from the SWAN evaluation, no recent independent, external evaluations or reviews of the other mechanisms have been carried out, so there was no basis for a systematic comparison of performance or outcomes across the HRMs.³ In addition, no internal reviews of performance were made available from the lead donors or agencies of the various HRMs. As a result, this review is largely impressionistic, based on the views of the key informants interviewed.

The intent of the review is not to make conclusive judgements on the performance of the individual HRMs, but rather to highlight what seems to work well, to identify common constraints, and to consider steps that might be taken to improve—via the rapid response mechanism approach—collective humanitarian responses in Ethiopia.

A total of 14 key informants from donors, international NGOs (INGOs), and UN agencies (including cluster leads) were interviewed.⁴ All these staff members took time from their all-consuming work on crises in Ethiopia, and the author is grateful for their generous contributions.⁵

³ An independent evaluation of the RRM is now underway (as of July 2021), but findings are not yet available. A planned evaluation of the ERM for late 2020 was postponed and has not been rescheduled.

⁴ Please see Annex B for the list of respondents interviewed during this review.

⁵ The breakdown of interviews for the review is as follows: four donor representatives; four UN/OCHA/cluster staff; and six INGO HRM staff.

2 A patchwork of HRMs

2.1 Mechanisms covered by the review⁶

1. The ERM: Operational since 2013, the ERM is funded by the Directorate General (DG) for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO). The aim of the ERM is to respond to both sudden and slow-onset disasters in all regions of Ethiopia through emergency assistance in WASH, nutrition, health, shelter/non-food items (NFIs), and education sectors. The value of ERM 7 ('ERM 7' refers to the seventh-phase funding of the mechanism—its timeframe is roughly one year, lasting through mid-2021) is approximately US\$ 5.6 million. The grant is managed by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), in consortium with GOAL International; a Steering Committee of partner (mostly international) NGOs approves grants. ERM 8, now being finalised, includes more national NGO representation on the Steering Committee and aims to ensure a wider pool of grant recipients beyond the lead agencies and the Steering Committee members.

2. The RRF: The RRF, established in May 2018, is funded by USAID/the Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs (BHA) and is implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The RRF aims to respond to acute, emergency shelter/NFIs needs of populations that are affected by new aspects of ongoing crises, or new natural and/or man-made crises. IOM awards grants to international and national NGOs across a variety of humanitarian sectors, including shelter/NFIs, WASH, agriculture and food security, health, nutrition, protection, and humanitarian coordination and information management.

3. The RRM: The RRM, funded by USAID/BHA and active since 2012, focuses on the emergency provision of nutrition and WASH services throughout Ethiopia. The current three-year phase (2017–20) has a budget of US\$ 37 million. It is implemented by IRC and Concern Worldwide, with Catholic Relief Services also playing a lead consortium role on food assistance and community engagement. The consortium members implement programmes directly and subgrant to local partners. As of mid-2021, final residual activities of the RRM (community/food component) are being carried through December 2021. There are currently no plans to extend the mechanism after 2021.

4. The RRM/P: The RRM/P is funded by USAID/BHA and implemented by IRC. Focusing on emergency child protection, gender-based violence (GBV), and psychosocial services, the mechanism targets conflict and natural disaster-affected communities and internally displaced persons (IDPs) facing protection risks. The RRM/P seeks to enhance the safety and wellbeing of women and children IDPs.

⁶ The four mechanisms covered by the review were examined in comparison to the SWAN mechanism/consortium. For detailed information on the SWAN itself, see the full SWAN evaluation report. At least two additional and sizeable HRMs/funds are also operational in Ethiopia but were not covered in detail by this review: the UNICEF-led RRM focusing on WASH, and EHF (administered by OCHA).

2.2 Mechanisms created and adapted to fill gaps

The evolution and number of HRMs in Ethiopia roughly parallels the increasingly complex and more frequent acute humanitarian crises in the country, especially since 2017. In particular, due to the surge in conflict-induced crises and displacement (e.g. in 2019, close to 3 million people displaced nationwide and in 2020–21, Tigray was plunged into conflict), the existing HRMs—originally designed to respond primarily to rapid-onset and slow-onset natural disasters—have increasingly been viewed as inadequate in terms of both capacity and sectoral coverage.

The original HRMs (the RRM and the ERM), which date back to 2012/13, were retooled and new mechanisms were introduced to address the new challenges. The ERM was expanded to cover additional sectors and to address concerns that a greater pool of implementing agencies was needed to meet additional needs around the country. USAID increased support for WASH through an RRM housed in UNICEF, partly to address the shortcomings of the original RRM. USAID and IOM established the RRF to address unmet shelter/NFI needs surrounding displacement. SWAN was created in part to augment and bring greater agility to EHF, as well as to bring additional INGOs more firmly into a rapid response approach anchored in coordination and decision making within the cluster system. Finally, the RRM/P was created by USAID and IRC in reaction to the human rights and protection abuses provoked by conflict, especially in Tigray.

For some donors (notably the United Kingdom), emphasis was placed on using and strengthening the UN/Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)-based cluster system. For others (the United States and the European Union), OCHA and the cluster system in Ethiopia was perceived as weak and ill-suited to the new types of emergencies, and as a result they redoubled their support for NGO-led mechanisms. In the views of most informants interviewed for this review, the capacity and leadership of OCHA and the cluster system has improved considerably over the past 18–24 months; however, turnover and quality of staff (at both OCHA and in the clusters), as well as (for some NGOs and donors) the independence and neutrality of clusters co-led by the government, remain a concern.

3 Factors influencing stronger and weaker HRM responses

Informants interviewed were for the most part generous in their assessment of the timeliness, quality, and cost-efficiency of interventions across the four HRMs covered in this review, as well as of the SWAN mechanism. The various HRMs were frequently described as delivering interventions of similar quality, at similar cost points, and at varying but roughly equivalent timelines.

Shortcomings cited regarding specific HRMs (e.g. SWAN in its timeliness at the outset of the consortium; the ERM in its partner inclusiveness; or the RRM in its collaboration with clusters) have led to adjustments being taken by the relevant mechanism managers and recognised by their peers in other mechanisms or in the clusters. As one key informant with an overview of all the mechanisms explained, 'Each individual response has its own story', and the frustrations and delays experienced by one mechanism on a response might well be felt in future by another mechanism on a different intervention.

Given the complexity and constraints of operating in the Ethiopia humanitarian context, HRM managers were quick to acknowledge that, when their own or another mechanism was struggling to respond quickly or effectively, this was often due to exogenous factors outside their control—for example, restrictions on access imposed by the government, systemic problems with procurement, or poor capacity in local woreda administrations.

The two frequently cited exceptions to this generally positive assessment of HRM performance were delays in grant approvals within the RRM (especially after new vetting requirements for subgrants were imposed by USAID towards the end of 2019) and the unsuitability of twice-yearly grant approvals by EHF (which were not conducive to rapid responses in quickly evolving humanitarian crises). These mechanisms, however, did offer other positive features, which are noted below.

Although the mechanisms covered in the review have some contrasting governance and procedural features, what was most notable in interviews with stakeholders was the extent to which all the HRMs converge on common practices, suggesting there are characteristics and strategies that are recognised as determining a successful HRM in Ethiopia. Similarly, the mechanisms across the board are struggling with common constraints that hinder optimal performance.

The factors that make a successful HRM, as well as a number of the persistent constraints (including the lack of data to measure performance, quality, and value for money across the mechanisms), are discussed below.

3.1 Components of more successful rapid response interventions

With urgent life-saving and life-sustaining objectives at the centre of all the HRM interventions, reaching affected populations quickly and with the right assistance is of

paramount importance. The following are four characteristics that drive successful rapid response interventions, in the view of the key informants for this review:

- i. rapid approval procedures and flexibility in adapting to changing circumstances;
- ii. a wide pool of potential implementing partners and transparency in grant processes;
- iii. capacity for integrated, multisectoral programming; and
- iv. coordination and information sharing within and among the clusters.

i. Rapid approval and flexibility

One key factor for success cited by interviewees was a funding structure that allowed for immediate in-country funding approval following an alert and assessment of a crisis event. The flexibility to make changes in an approved response (e.g. shifting interventions from one woreda to another, or redirecting resources towards another sectoral need) was also noted as crucial for quality responses. The SWAN project, having entrusted its funding up front to the consortium, allowed for almost immediate approval of funding for specific interventions. Likewise, in more recent years, the ERM (ERM 7 and the forthcoming ERM 8) had put decision making authority for grants with its Steering Committee at the country level, avoiding a lengthy back-and-forth with ECHO in Addis or in Brussels. Another important factor contributing to timeliness and flexibility is the extent to which overhead costs for a mechanism (e.g. staffing for the response mechanisms, or back office functions to assure quick hiring) are covered by donors. INGOs interviewed noted, for example, how crucial it was that ECHO and USAID grants allowed them to cover their full (or almost full) operational costs.

The timing of grant approvals under the USAID-funded HRMs, on the other hand, was inconsistent as they were tied to more formal and informal requirements of the donor. A number of informants reported that the RRM suffered from serious delays as a result of lengthy negotiations between IRC and USAID on grant proposals. The RRM was also more inflexible in accepting amendments/adjustments to the originally approved activities under a grant. The RRF, also funded by USAID, appeared to navigate the donor approval process more smoothly. This was ascribed by key informants to donors being willing to allow UN agencies greater leeway than INGOs, based on global UN–donor partnership agreements. According to one NGO official interviewed, ‘USAID can approve with UN agencies in two days, what [it] takes us two months for approval.’

The importance (or burden) of editing and shepherding national partner grant proposals through donor requirements was also cited as a factor in accelerating approval response times, although several interviewees questioned whether this often time-consuming editing of proposals brought improved outcomes for affected populations or better accountability for donors. Recognising the damaging delays experienced in grant approvals under the RRM, USAID and IRC are convinced they have taken steps under the newly created protection mechanism (the RRM/P) to overcome this bottleneck.⁷

⁷ The RRM/P has only recently been approved and key informants interviewed confirmed it was too early to comment on the timeliness or quality of interventions under the mechanism.

Another element that contributes to more rapid performance is defined and transparent response targets/indicators for timeliness. Each of the mechanisms examined was tracking the timeliness of its performance to some extent, and those targets forced accountability on both donor and implementing partners. The ERM, for example, has set a time limit for when its Steering Committee should have produced a briefing note to consider following an alert (within 48 hours), for when the Steering Committee should meet and decide on a response (within four days of an event), and for when a response should reach affected people (within nine days).

While these targets are often not met for various reasons (often related to logistics and security), they impose a discipline on the mechanism. According to ERM officials, the timeliness of performance has improved significantly over the past two years as a result of ERM 7 imposing and monitoring stricter response time targets. The SWAN mechanism was also cited as having been born in part out of frustration at the slowness of existing response mechanisms. Built-in indicators for response time were a key part of its project design.

Across the spectrum of officials interviewed for this review, there was a clear consensus that the primary determinant for quick response times was the availability of pre-positioned supplies. Pre-positioning, in turn, was linked in part to procurement capacity and the predictability of up-front funding to avoid pipeline breaks. Positive response times for SWAN and the ERM were attributed to instances when they had pre-positioned NFIs in place for both conflict-related and drought-related responses. Cluster officials noted that the ERM and SWAN had been relatively strong on procurement in the difficult procurement context of Ethiopia (with SCI continuing to work to further streamline arrangements on behalf of INGOs with the Ministries of Finance and Health). As a UN agency, IOM (implementing the RRF) may have benefited from standard government waivers to the UN on import taxes and fees, as well as from being able to tap into its regional and global supply chains.

ii. A wide pool of implementing partners and transparency in awarding grants

Interviewees working with the various HRMs, as well as cluster officials, stressed how crucial it was to ensure the ability of the mechanisms to access a large pool of potential implementing agencies. This would ensure better geographic coverage and better local expertise for specific interventions. A transparent process of selecting partners would also help ensure that humanitarian resources are being directed at the most capable and appropriate implementing partner rather than, for example, to an INGO partner just because that INGO is a member of a particular consortium. It would also ensure that the actual breadth of partners being awarded grants is publicly available. Officials from each of the mechanisms reviewed stated that their mechanisms had instituted robust measures to ensure open and competitive awarding of grants, paying particular care to cultivate pre-vetted partners, including national and local NGOs. SWAN cited its 'zero-value agreements'⁸ as evidence of its readiness to award grants to non-consortium members. The ERM has moved from setting aside a large proportion of its resources for IRC to creating a Steering Committee that has brought seven or eight partners into decision making on grants (with the pool of awarded INGOs also increasing). The RRF works closely through the shelter cluster, ensuring all shelter cluster partners have the opportunity to access funding. The continuity of

⁸ These refer to standby contracts with potential partners that would only have a budget attached if a partner is eventually awarded a grant.

the RRM (which has been under the same management structure for more than eight years), and the fact it has a specific community engagement component, were cited as factors in achieving high levels of participation among local partners.

In practice, however, a high degree of scepticism and distrust exists among the various HRMs. SWAN and the ERM were both described by some interviewees as ‘cartels’, awarding grants for the most part to the INGOs who constitute the consortium or steering group. Other interviewees pointed to the longstanding RRM arrangements (with one-third of the mechanism funds earmarked to IRC) as a less than optimal arrangement for the growing and geographically dispersed emergencies across Ethiopia. The clusters were also described as too concerned with spreading grant awards (in the case of EHF and the RRF) among active members rather than seeking the most appropriate partners. Almost all interviewees acknowledged that much greater effort was needed to increase the participation of national and local organisations (this is discussed further below).

iii. Capacity for integrated, multisectoral programming

Having the skills and flexibility within a response mechanism to respond to diverse and changing needs and priorities among affected populations was identified by respondents as a key component of effective responses. Both SWAN and the ERM act across multiple sectors, which was especially important in communities where few humanitarian actors are present. The RRM and the RRF, in contrast, work in a limited number of sectors. In some IDP camps, under the RRM, IRC was implementing WASH programmes but was unable to provide food, which was its target beneficiaries’ priority. Staff interviewed for the study pointed to challenges in bringing much needed health, nutrition, protection, and food interventions at the same pace as interventions providing emergency WASH and shelter inputs.

Although the RRM suffered from significant delays in approvals and hence in deliveries in the field, this slower pace has also sometimes allowed IRC to plan and sequence aid for a community, bringing together its WASH and nutrition programmes and coordinating with the food security cluster for more general food assistance. As in the evaluation of SWAN, a number of interviewees pointed to instances when the relatively rapid delivery of tarpaulins or kitchen sets was appreciated, but food remained an unmet priority need.

Others questioned why the HRMs were not systematically delivering more unconditional cash transfers, and were sceptical of arguments that cash might be used ‘for unintended purpose or priorities’ (see the SWAN evaluation draft, p. 26) or that there were insurmountable security and logistics hurdles to providing cash.

iv. Coordination and information sharing within and among the clusters

There was complete consensus among staff interviewed for the study that working in close consultation with the cluster system was essential to being an effective HRM. Furthermore, the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG) was repeatedly identified as the body most appropriate to bring together and share information across the various HRMs. Although some donors (ECHO and USAID) were reluctant to place decision making authority for grants within the clusters (as was the case for SWAN, in contrast with the ERM or the RRM), the real issue, according to cluster leadership, is not approval authority but transparency and information sharing.

The RRF, implemented by IOM (which co-chairs the emergency shelter cluster), is fully integrated into the cluster system, without having grants approved by the cluster. Both ECHO and USAID have encouraged organisations in their respectively funded HRMs to improve dialogue and information sharing with the relevant clusters and with the ICCG. According to OCHA and cluster staff, these improvements have been evident over the past 18 months, although an overall picture of humanitarian actors in each sector—where they are working, their budgets, their stock positions, etc.—remains elusive.

According to donors and INGOs, cluster staffing and leadership has improved since 2018/19, which has brought greater value to participating fully in the cluster system. Some donors and INGOs also felt that maintaining some independence from the government-led cluster system on decision making around grants and interventions was prudent given the highly political context of conflict-related crises in Tigray and elsewhere.

3.2 Common shortcomings across Ethiopia's HRMs

A number of recurrent issues surfaced during the review regarding challenges and shortcomings around the existing response mechanisms. These are related in part to the proliferation of different mechanisms, as well as to the severe and recurrent crises in the country over the past two to three years (increasingly tied to conflict), which have not given humanitarian donors and agencies in Ethiopia time to reflect on how best to manage a system that has been built in a piecemeal manner. In particular, four thematic shortcomings were raised through the review of available documentation and through interviews with key informants:

- i. lack of transparency on activities and performance;
- ii. weak linkages with medium-term and longer-term programming;
- iii. questions on capacity around protection and do-no-harm; and
- iv. insufficient work on building sustainable, national response mechanisms, particularly through localisation.

i. Lack of transparency on activities and performance

One notable finding of this review was the absence of independent evaluations or reviews of the HRMs in Ethiopia, apart from the recently completed SWAN evaluation.⁹ In addition, key informants were unable or unwilling to identify internal reviews or assessments—or even publicly available documents (e.g. press releases or communication documents issued from the agencies themselves)—that might comment on overall budgets and deliveries, beneficiaries reached, partners subcontracted for deliveries, or analysis of cost-efficiency or value for money.

Of particular relevance in trying to assess and compare the performances of the HRMs is the lack of shared or common metrics for measuring performance (timeliness, cost-efficiency, etc.). Also, apart from SWAN (which provides some information—such as its

⁹ As noted above, an evaluation of the RRM is now underway and should also contribute to decision making on the future architecture of HRMs in Ethiopia.

stock situation and distribution reports—to its consortium partners and other key stakeholders, including donors), there is a general opaqueness surrounding basic information on each of the mechanisms.

As several respondents confirmed, information among mechanisms is shared on an *ad hoc* basis and is dependent on personal relations. Frequent staff turnover means that understanding of the mechanisms—let alone detailed knowledge about mechanism budgets, procedures, etc.—is sometimes lost, even by cluster leads. One key informant with an overview of HRMs noted he had never seen the proposals, contracts, or budgets for several mechanisms, and had no means of understanding where resources might be available or of objectively commenting on the relative performance of the various mechanisms.

ii. Weak linkages with medium-term and longer-term programming

Although by no means unusual in humanitarian programmes in Ethiopia, the absence of humanitarian–development ‘nexus’ linkages to the HRM activities was keenly felt by staff, in part because the duration of interventions is so short, even by emergency response standards (three to nine months maximum, in most cases). This was exacerbated by efforts by donors to insist (in the case of the RRM, the ERM, and the RRF) that activities should respond only to *new and acute crises*—an artificial distinction in the case of communities that suffer at once from chronic poverty and food security and that are regularly beset by additional shocks.

With the HRMs increasingly addressing internal displacement—which in some cases becomes repeated or protracted displacement—a number of staff described the futility of quick-fix interventions such as emergency WASH or temporary shelter/NFIs, which do little to contribute to longer-term needs or durable solutions.

Likewise, communities that suffer from drought or flooding are repeatedly facing crises, and the HRMs do little to address the underlying causes of these shocks. The INGOs with substantial presence and activities in Ethiopia (such as IRC or SCI) try when possible to build connections with the other country activities, but many of the interviewees felt that more flexible duration in grants, in the absence of greater systemic linkages with development actors and resources, would at least soften rapid exits (a finding mirrored in the SWAN evaluation).

Donors are aware of this dilemma and some, such as ECHO, are trying to respect a ‘crisis modifier’ approach, which can allow for larger and more lengthy follow-up grants to implementing partners. ECHO is also trying to build linkages with the European Union DEVCO programming, for example, in support of capacity building and disaster risk reduction programming at the National Disaster Risk Management Commission.

iii. Questions on capacity around protection and do-no-harm

With the sharp increase in conflict-related interventions, staff of the reviewed HRMs questioned whether donors were providing adequate funding through the mechanisms to ensure that new demands around protection and do-no-harm could be met. Each of the mechanisms covered by the review have sufficient procedures for incorporating considerations of protection and do-no-harm in their interventions, including in grant submission.

The major INGOs managing the HRMs in Ethiopia are international leaders on these issues and have strong institutional commitment and safeguards. This includes requiring codes of conduct, a minimum level of staff training on issues such as prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, and in some cases (e.g. IRC, SCI, and NRC) protection-specific expertise within their agencies.

However, most staff interviewed felt that attention to protection and do-no-harm issues at the field level had become more of a 'check-the-box' exercise in grant proposals. Without greater resources dedicated to protection within NFI, WASH, or cash responses, and without a longer duration of grants, it was difficult to identify and point beneficiaries towards referral services (in cases where those referral services existed). The recent establishment by USAID and IRC of a protection-specific mechanism (the RRM/P) is a reflection of this general sense that emergency responses have been neglecting protection needs.

iv. Insufficient work on building sustainable, national response mechanisms, particularly through localisation

The key informants for this review consistently identified two indicators for the sustainability of the HRMs. The first indicator was a mechanism that attracts support from multiple donors, which was seen as more likely to be sustainable over time. The SWAN mechanism (which had diversified donor support to include contributions from Irish Aid and from ECHO) was cited, as was the wider donor base of the RRF. However, the fact that two of the longest-standing HRMs in Ethiopia (the RRM and the ERM, funded by USAID and ECHO respectively) rely exclusively on a single donor suggests that donor diversity may not actually be an indicator of the sustainability or longevity of an HRM.

More importantly, no respondents were able to point to instances of mechanisms working to build overall national capacity to respond to acute emergencies. From this perspective, the four HRMs covered in this review, as well as other active response mechanisms in Ethiopia, are built on an external intervention model, potentially open-ended in terms of timeframe and fully reliant on continued donor funding.

The second indicator of sustainability stressed by the staff of the mechanisms was their commitment to increasing partnership with national and local NGOs in order to empower local organisations to manage and respond to future crises. On this point, however (as noted above), the theory might be correct, but the practice of actually adopting a localisation agenda is lagging behind, as it is across most of the international humanitarian world.

Several respondents suggested that resources channelled closely through the cluster system (e.g. SWAN, the RRF, and EHF), as well as ERM funding, are not in practice filtering down to grants and subgrants for national organisations. Without transparent and publicly available data across the various mechanisms, including the values and awardees of grants, it is impossible to quantify progress on localisation within the HRMs. According to one senior INGO leader, the lack of national NGO participation in the clusters and their lack of understanding and capacity regarding how the system of grant making works plays a part in slowing progress on localisation.

The self-interest of INGOs, as well as the difficulty and costliness of implementing the localisation agenda (e.g. the labour-intensive mentoring and training of local NGOs to give

them the tools to meet donor reporting requirements), also contributes a situation where the rhetoric on sustainability (through localisation) is likely outpacing the reality on the ground.

4 Future response mechanisms: architecture, common shortcomings, and programme choices

Given the relentless pace of crises in Ethiopia over the past several years, donors and agencies have had little time to reflect on the overall architecture of HRMs, to share learning and frustrations, or to seek collective changes to the systemic issues all the mechanisms are facing.

The purpose of this section of the review is to suggest a number of areas the HRMs as a whole (including their donors and their implementing partners) may wish to consider as they seek improved outcomes for crisis-affected populations in the coming months and years. These are organised as follows:

- i) suggestions regarding the overall architecture of HRMs in Ethiopia;
- ii) suggestions regarding addressing common constraints and shortcomings; and
- iii) suggestions regarding possible adjustments in programme choices.

I. Architecture of HRMs in Ethiopia

- **Consolidate the number of mechanisms, gradually:** Across the spectrum of key informants interviewed, there was a general sentiment that, as one official described, ‘It feels like there are too many, to be honest.’ The optimum number suggested by staff in INGOs and the clusters was two to three in total, with all agreeing that several mechanisms (as opposed to a single pooled fund mechanism) would be better for resource mobilisation, for healthy competition, and for better overall geographic and sectoral coverage. Everyone interviewed stressed that the major problem with the existing mechanisms is not duplication or poor coordination, but overall resource constraints in a context of growing and unmet needs around the country. Given the prevailing crisis atmosphere, staff of the HRMs and the clusters felt that the unwinding of some of the mechanisms should be carried out gradually.
- **Establish some common platform for the HRMs to exchange learning and to agree on common advocacy positions:** There are no structured or semi-structured opportunities for the various mechanisms to meet and exchange views or concerns. The last reflection among HRMs in Ethiopia took place at a workshop in March 2019. Besides creating a space to resolve some of the common misunderstandings noted above (e.g. perceptions of operating on a ‘cartel’-like basis, or the need for more information sharing within clusters), such a platform could help shape future response mechanisms and potentially allow various mechanisms and their donors to work together to overcome common constraints (e.g. procurement issues with the Government of Ethiopia). A platform could be constituted, for example, through the ICCG or the Humanitarian and Resilience Donor Group. Twice-yearly meetings with an agenda focused on decisions for future action, rather than on information sharing, would probably be sufficient.

- **Agree on common metrics to measure performance of the various mechanisms, including timeliness and value for money:** This review was unable to compare the performance of the HRMs in any quantitative way. Donors should push for (possibly in the platform suggested above, possibly through OCHA), and fund, a more in-depth comparative study of the mechanisms with a view towards building common performance indicators and a greater culture of independent review and evaluation of the HRMs.

II. Addressing common constraints and shortcomings

- **Work collectively to overcome repeated and systemic procurement and pre-positioning issues:** Government regulations and inefficiencies around procurement—especially for medical supplies—are stymying HRM performance. Joint advocacy (including donors) with the government to streamline humanitarian imports, especially for INGOs, is needed. Discussions on procurement undertaken with the Ministries of Finance and Health through the HINGO group should be followed up. Greater coordination between donors and agencies on the timing of procurement might also help improve efficiency. According to cluster staff, donor funding awards to HRMs—and so procurement of NFIs locally—are concentrated in the first quarter of the year, meaning that procurement orders and pre-positioning of items is not staggered evenly across the year.
- **Set more ambitious targets for contracting local NGOs and adopt transparent indicators to measure progress:** The HRMs cannot at once tout the use of national actors as their sole strategy for contributing to the sustainability of national response capacity, while at the same time not publishing detailed analyses of how national actors are actually engaged. This has led to a widespread perception that, in the case of the HRMs, the localisation agenda is lagging. More ambitious and transparent targets should push donors (themselves champions of the global localisation agenda) to support the additional overhead funding needed, at least in the short term, to begin a transition towards greater use of local actors. The 2019 change in civil society regulations in Ethiopia (the Civil Society Proclamation 2019) suggests greater progress than has been possible in the past may be achievable. Simplifying grant proposals for local organisations (e.g. through a common ‘one application’) or streamlining vetting procedures for pre-approved partners are the kind of practical steps that could be taken.
- **Build a simple, shared information management platform for use by the various HRMs and the OCHA/cluster system:** This platform should provide an overall view of grants, activities, and actors, as well as a snapshot of available NFIs and their positioning. The platform built for SWAN that covers stock management (with access made available to its partners and donors) might be expanded to bring in other HRMs and to include additional information. Stakeholders could consider moving toward a standardised monitoring, evaluation, and learning system, with periodic (independent) reviews/evaluations of all mechanisms.

III. Adjustments in programme choices

This review did not have the means to examine programme quality in terms of the activities of the HRMs, but several recurring themes came up in the interviews, which humanitarian

leaders in Ethiopia may want to consider as they work to improve rapid response mechanisms.

- Consider more lengthy timeframes for grants, and examine why HRM and cluster staff feel there is a lack of strategies or programmes to link rapid responses to longer-term development investments: The UN Country Team, the Humanitarian Country Team, and the Humanitarian and Resilience Donor Group (and certainly others) are all settings identified by informants where nexus discussions for Ethiopia are taking place, but staff involved closely in the HRMs feel that their on-the-ground activities are rarely connecting to investments that could help resolve root causes of humanitarian needs.
- **Re-examine assumptions about the risks of providing unconditional cash transfers:** Delays in providing basic shelter and household NFIs (even in the best response examples), as well as beneficiary preferences, suggest that cash transfers should make up a greater part of the HRM's portfolio. Unsubstantiated arguments against unconditional cash transfers are reminiscent of debates in other humanitarian settings a decade ago. The opening up to new telecom companies in Ethiopia might also provide greater opportunities for cash transfer modalities.
- **Consider whether stronger linkages to food assistance are needed:** A number of HRM staff noted how often their beneficiaries were dissatisfied because one of their priority needs, food, was not provided together with WASH or NFI assistance. This was also reflected in the SWAN evaluation. Food assistance in cash or in-kind as a more integral part of response packages (in partnership with the food security cluster) should be considered.

Annex A Terms of Reference – comparative review

Limited Comparative Review of Humanitarian Funding Mechanisms in Ethiopia

Introduction

Oxford Policy Management (OPM) is undertaking an evaluation of SWAN – *Provision of Essential Humanitarian Supplies of Health, WASH and ESNFIs Through Timely and Cost-Effective Procurement and Response Mechanism* (‘the project’ or ‘the SWAN project’), which is being implemented in Ethiopia by a consortium of four international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (the ‘SWAN consortium’): **S**ave the Children International, **W**orld Vision International, **A**ction Against Hunger, and the **N**orwegian Refugee Council.

This evaluation has been commissioned by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) on behalf of the EHF Advisory Board¹⁰ and covers the period between March 2019 and October 2020. The purpose of this evaluation is twofold:

- a) to assess to what extent the SWAN consortium has been an effective humanitarian response mechanism as part of the wider humanitarian response; and
- b) to assess to what extent the approach undertaken by the SWAN consortium partners has been appropriate.

Background to the Comparative Review

In addition, as initially outlined in the evaluation inception report, the evaluation team was asked to undertake a comparative review of SWAN with other existing rapid humanitarian funding mechanisms operational in Ethiopia, namely:

The **Emergency Response Mechanism** (GOAL, 2018): funded the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) and implemented by two NGOs: the International Rescue Committee and GOAL. The aim of the Emergency Response Mechanism is to respond to both sudden and slow-onset disasters in all regions of Ethiopia through emergency assistance in the WASH, nutrition, health, shelter/NFIs, and education sectors.

The **Rapid Response Fund** (IOM, 2015): funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/the Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs (BHA)¹¹ and implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The Rapid Response

¹⁰ In 2019, membership of the EHF Advisory Board included: four EHF donors; two humanitarian international NGOs; one Ethiopian humanitarian NGO; and two humanitarian United Nations agencies. See OCHA (2019c).

¹¹ The Rapid Response Mechanism was previously funded by USAID/the Office of Disaster Assistance (OFDA). However, OFDA has recently been merged with the BHA, which now manages both the Rapid Response Mechanism and the Rapid Response Fund.

Fund aims to respond to acute, emergency shelter/NFIs needs of populations that are affected by new aspects of ongoing crises, or new natural and/or man-made crises.

The **Rapid Response Mechanism** (International Rescue Committee, n.d.): also funded by USAID/BHA and implemented by two NGOs: the International Rescue Committee and Concern Worldwide. The Rapid Response Mechanism focuses on emergency provision of nutrition and WASH services anywhere in Ethiopia.

The **Protection Rapid Response Mechanism** (International Rescue Committee), funded by USAID/BHA and implemented by the International Rescue Committee. This is an **Emergency CP and GBV Response** programme, which seeks to provide integrated child protection (CP), gender-based violence (GBV) and psychosocial support services to conflict and natural disaster-affected communities and displaced persons facing protection risks. The project objective is to enhance the safety and wellbeing of women and children IDPs through emergency gender-based violence (GBV), child protection (CP), and psychosocial support services (PSS) intervention in emergency locations in Ethiopia.

Specifically, the evaluation was asked to consider how the SWAN project compared with the other mechanisms in relation to the following issues:

- The extent each mechanism is designed and implemented in line with protection and do no harm principles;
- The extent to which the mechanisms coordinate and collaborate amongst themselves as well as other humanitarian agencies and cluster;
- The timeliness and effectiveness of the rapid response mechanisms;
- Value for money (VfM) among the mechanisms and implications for future donor funding decisions;
- Exit strategies of the mechanisms and expectations for sustainability.

A number of **concerns were raised** by the evaluation team with FCDO **about the scope of the ‘comparison’ elements of the evaluation**, in particular the **lack of comparable evaluations** across the other response mechanisms and the **risk of detracting focus and methodological quality from the core evaluation questions regarding the SWAN project**.

Consequently, it was **agreed that the evaluation design would be narrowed around SWAN itself and that an additional deliverable would be undertaken to address the comparative questions**. This revised approach was agreed as it was outlined in a concept note and elaborated on in a discussion between FCDO and OPM in early February.¹² It was provisionally agreed at this point that the comparative review would be limited to the documentation that other rapid funding mechanisms had in place and potentially supplemented by minimal interviews with representatives from the other response mechanisms.

¹² SWAN Evaluation Design: limitations of comparison and additionality offer (1 February 2021)

Key Questions for the Comparative Review

The Comparative Review Questions will structure the interviews and guide the document review. In the interviews, the questions may be further sub-divided when interview guide is prepared.

Comparative Review Questions

1. How does the ERM/RRF/RRM operate and in what ways are its basic modalities (funding, governance, awards, disbursement, monitoring), in your view, different (better or worse?) from the SWAN mechanism?
2. How do ERM/RRF/RRM needs assessments and implementation models incorporate protection and do no harm principles? Is this consistent, as far as you know, with how the other rapid response mechanism in Ethiopia (including SWAN) operate? What are the differences?
3. How would you compare the effectiveness of ERM/RRF/RRM project activity deliveries with deliveries by the other response mechanisms (including SWAN)? What would you attribute to these differences?
4. What is the role played by the cluster system with ERM/RRF/RRM and, as far as you understand, how is this different from the role EHF plays with the SWAN project? Does the cluster system contribute in different ways to the outcomes achieved in the various rapid response mechanisms?
5. How does the ERM/RRF/RRM measure its cost-efficiency or value-for-money? And in your view, are there differences between the cost-efficiency/VfM of the existing rapid response mechanisms in Ethiopia? (documents/reviews/analysis that could be shared that shed light on this?)
6. What timeframe is the ERM/RRF/RRM designed to deliver within, from the point of an activation being identified?
7. How and to what extent does ERM/RRF/RRM coordinate and collaborate with the SWAN consortium and other response mechanisms?
8. What are the exit strategies and sustainability strategies for ERM/RRF/RRM? As far as you know, are there any notable differences between exit/sustainability strategies among the 4 rapid mechanisms?
9. What effect is the ERM/RRF/RRM having on the capacity of the Government of Ethiopia to respond to disasters quickly and effectively? What effect have other rapid response mechanisms had in this regard?
10. Is there any documentation you could share to help better understand or delve deeper into the questions we've discussed (to be asked along the way...)

Proposed Methodology and Workplan for the Comparative Review

In order to carry out a comparative review of limited scope, OPM proposes undertaking the following 3-step process, which will **require the active assistance of the FCDO evaluation counterpart**.

1. Initial discussions & and data/document gathering

- Interview of key FCDO evaluation counterpart(s) in order to
 - identify key stakeholders to be interviewed by the evaluation team (FCDO to facilitate introductions and follow up for interview scheduling as necessary)
 - identify and provide key documents to the study team on the three rapid funding mechanisms
 - literature review of publicly available documentation on the 3 mechanisms, including assessment of usefulness of the documentation for comparative purposes

Estimated time: 3 person days

2. Interviews with Key Informants, tentative list of interviewees:

- Donor lead(s) for each of the three mechanisms:
 - ERM (1-2 ECHO interviews – 1 in-country, 1 HQ);
 - RRF (1 USAID interview);
 - RRM (1 USAID interview);
 - P-RRM (1 USAID interview)= 5 donor interviews
- NGO/agency lead(s) for each of the three mechanisms:
 - ERM (2 interviews total with IRC and GOAL);
 - RRF (1 interview with IOM and/or IOM's main implementing partner);
 - RRM (2 interviews total with IRC and Concern)
 - P-RRM (1 interview with IRC)= 6 NGO/agency interviews
- EHF (2 interviews)
- Total interviews (13-14) + interview write-ups

Estimated time: 5-7 person days

3. Comparative analysis write-up based on interviews and available documentation

Estimated time: 3 person days

4. Analysis and Write-up

- A 3-4 page write-up outlining the views of Key Informants (and reflecting any relevant documentation) will be prepared. It will include recommendations for FCDO, other donors, and the EHF to consider for future funding considerations and configurations of response mechanisms.
- Key findings of the comparative review will be triangulated with findings from current evaluation being implemented by OPM.

Estimated time: 3 person days

Limitations of the Comparative Review

The review will be based mostly on the views of a limited number of key informants, supplemented – when available – with findings from any available, independent reviews of the three rapid response mechanisms or of the EHF generally as well as referencing evidence from the current SWAN evaluation. Any value for money (VfM) comparison will be limited entirely to VfM assessments that have already been conducted by other mechanisms and their comparability. It will also not be able to provide a rigorous comparative analysis of the effectiveness of outcomes among the four mechanisms.

Annex B List of respondents

Person interviewed	Organisation and role	Date interviewed
Donors		
Clément Cazaubon	ECHO, Technical Assistant ERM	03 June
Eloise Roux	ECHO, Technical Assistant ERM	03 June
Sintayheyu Manaye	USAID, Program Management Specialist	17 June
Zeine Muzeiyn	USAID, Program Management Specialist	17 June
UN/OCHA/cluster		
Christina Burwell	IOM, RRF manager	15 June
Tim Mander	OCHA, Head EHF (until mid-2021)	04 June
Mulegeta Gutema	IOM, Shelter Cluster Coordinator	14 June
Wendimu Keba	UNICEF, WASH Cluster Deputy Coordinator	17 June
INGO/Mechanism staff		
Eileen Morrow	Concern, Country Director (until mid-2021)	29 June
Ekin Ogutogullari	Country Director, SCI	18 June
Frank McManus	IRC, Country Director	07 June
Johannes Gebre	IRC, RRM Manager	14 June
Teyent Tadesse	IRC (former), Emergency Programme Head	04 June
Wakene Totoba	IRC, ERM Focal Point	16 June