

# **ICAI follow-up of: The UK's humanitarian support to Syria**

A summary of ICAI's full follow-up

**July 2019**

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# Executive summary

ICAI's follow-up review is an important element in the scrutiny process for UK aid. It provides the International Development Committee and the public with an account of how well the government has responded to ICAI's recommendations to improve spending. It is also an opportunity for ICAI to identify issues and challenges facing the UK aid programme now and in the future, which in turn helps to inform subsequent reviews.

This document is a summary which focused only on the results of our follow up of The UK's humanitarian support to Syria. The full Follow Up report of all our 2017-18 reviews, including overall conclusions from the process and details of our methodology, can be found on our website.

## Findings

### The UK's humanitarian support to Syria

In response to the brutal conflict in Syria, the UK government launched its largest-ever humanitarian campaign, committing £2.81 billion to the region, with £1.03 billion allocated for humanitarian operations in Syria itself. ICAI's review, published in May 2018, assessed the effectiveness of DFID's humanitarian aid inside Syria since the beginning of the crisis response in 2012.

The review gave DFID a green-amber score, recognising that strong improvements had taken place over time and that vital UK aid had reached civilians in need – within the limitations of a complex and highly restrictive operational environment. We offered eight recommendations to further improve operations, as summarised in the table below. The Syrian context has changed dramatically since the publication of the ICAI report, resulting in some necessary adjustments to DFID Syria's programming and affecting its ability to act on some of our recommendations.

Table 1: Summary of recommendations and the government's response

| Subject of recommendation  | Government response |
|--|---------------------|
| As conditions allow, DFID Syria should prioritise livelihoods programming and supporting local markets, to strengthen community self-reliance                                      | Partially accepted  |
| Strengthen third-party monitoring to provide a higher level of independent verification of aid delivery  | Accepted            |
| Support partners to expand their community consultation and feedback processes and ensure this informs learning and future design  | Accepted            |
| Identify ways to support the capacity development of Syrian non-governmental organisations to have more direct roles in the humanitarian response                                  | Accepted            |
| DFID Syria should develop a dynamic research and learning strategy addressing learning needs across the international humanitarian response in Syria, and a dissemination strategy | Accepted            |
| Collect and document lessons and best practices from the Syria response, to inform ongoing and future crisis responses   | Accepted            |
| In complex crises, plan for a lengthy engagement from an early stage   | Accepted            |
| Build on DFID Syria's efforts to invest in reporting and data management systems that can be readily adapted to complex humanitarian operations                                    | Accepted            |

## **As conditions allow, DFID Syria should prioritise livelihoods programming and supporting local markets, to strengthen community self-reliance**

The ICAI review found that DFID was sometimes slow to move from emergency assistance to livelihoods support, and that its delivery partners needed encouragement, support and expertise to implement livelihoods programming. DFID only partially accepted our recommendation on livelihoods programming, arguing that it was often not possible to move out of emergency mode. ICAI agrees with this, noting that the transition can only be made when conditions allow.

DFID Syria is in the process of designing its new 2020 portfolio, and its livelihoods adviser is currently reviewing its approach to livelihoods and cash-based programming, which will lead to a new Livelihoods Strategy by mid-2019. This process should better position DFID Syria to respond to contextual challenges in the livelihoods sector.

## **Strengthen third-party monitoring to provide a higher level of independent verification of aid delivery**

DFID Syria's third-party monitoring approach was centred on mutual learning but lacked sufficient focus on assurance and accountability, given the scale and level of risk in the Syria operations. Monitoring visits were very short, and the monitoring system relied heavily on partners to select communities for monitoring visits, which introduced the possibility of bias. Until early 2018, visits only took place in opposition-controlled areas. ICAI therefore recommended that DFID Syria strengthen the independence and rigour of its third-party monitoring approach.

DFID Syria's response to this recommendation was thorough, with some improvements already under way before ICAI's recommendations were published. DFID Syria has updated its methodology on monitoring, and there are early signs of positive results from its change in sampling strategy, which reduces the role of implementing partners in the selection of monitoring visit locations. DFID Syria has also increased the length of monitoring visits from one to two days (and is piloting three-day visits). Together, these two changes will provide higher-quality and less biased data for assessing how projects perform and can be improved. Two further changes, monitoring in government-controlled areas and the addition of more in-depth verification visits, are at too early a stage of implementation for ICAI to assess them. The restricted access to government-controlled areas inevitably limits the effectiveness of monitoring.

## **Support partners to expand their community consultation and feedback processes and ensure this informs learning and future design**

DFID is committed to ensuring greater participation of and accountability to the populations it supports through its humanitarian action. The ICAI review found that the complaints mechanisms included in DFID's Syria projects were useful, but not adequate to meet this commitment. It also noted that feedback from communities was not being collated and analysed to inform learning and the design of new activities. We therefore recommended that DFID should support and encourage its local partners to expand community consultation and feedback, and use this feedback to improve the design of future programming.

DFID Syria's response has so far focused on information gathering on current processes. It has completed a desk-based research project that mapped beneficiary feedback mechanisms and their usage in Syria and conducted an assessment of DFID's delivery partners' monitoring and evaluation systems, including beneficiary feedback mechanisms. The assessment found that most of DFID's delivery partners relied on their downstream partners' processes – which DFID so far has not reviewed. DFID Syria indicates that it will use the information it has gathered to inform its 2020 programme portfolio, which is currently under design.

## **Identify ways to support the capacity development of Syrian non-governmental organisations to have more direct roles in the humanitarian response**

Most Syrian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are new, with little administrative capacity and little familiarity with donor requirements. We therefore recommended that DFID seek ways to support the capacity development of Syrian NGOs through its programming in order to strengthen the effective delivery of humanitarian aid in Syria and to further the UK's international commitment to the localisation of aid.

DFID's actions on this recommendation have been limited to funding an international NGO delivery partner to build the organisational capacity of one leading Syrian NGO. Unless there is more concentrated effort to address the capacity gaps of Syrian NGOs, it is unlikely that the localisation agenda can be furthered in Syria. Without stronger administrative, financial and quality assurance systems, it is unlikely that local NGOs will be able to meet the important due diligence requirements for receiving direct funding from DFID or other donors – requirements which safeguard public money and minimise opportunities for fraud and misuse.

### **DFID Syria should develop a dynamic research and learning strategy addressing learning needs across the international humanitarian response in Syria, and a dissemination strategy**

DFID Syria accepted ICAI's recommendation to develop an overarching strategy for producing and disseminating research, but its response to date has been limited to refining the process by which staff propose research pieces, requiring them also to identify their plans for dissemination. This may be an appropriate stop-gap in the absence of an overall learning strategy, but it does not address ICAI's concerns. DFID Syria's learning approach remains based on individual efforts around separate pieces of research and/or events like annual reviews. In the absence of a learning strategy, the risk remains that research pieces are siloed and wider learning does not occur.

### **Collect and document lessons and best practices from the Syria response, to inform ongoing and future crisis responses**

This recommendation was aimed at the way that DFID as an institution can learn from efforts in Syria to inform other crisis responses. The Conflict, Humanitarian and Security Department (CHASE) has led the effort to embed lessons from the Syria response into humanitarian policy and practice. However, information sharing continues to rely largely on the efforts of individuals. DFID's management information/data analytics team has recently introduced a search engine that will allow staff to search more easily for projects and topics. This tool may facilitate the collation of and access to lessons and experience across the organisation. All of these activities exist outside of an organisation-level learning strategy and structure, running the risk that learning remains fragmented and vital lessons are lost.

### **In complex crises, plan for a lengthy engagement from an early stage**

ICAI found that DFID's planning for the Syrian response remained on an emergency footing even after the crisis had become protracted. We recommended better planning for such situations, including having clear decision points for when to move beyond short-term funding instruments and staffing arrangements. DFID accepted ICAI's recommendation and outlined several actions to be taken by CHASE.

CHASE is in the process of synthesising learning from various crises in order to streamline the government's humanitarian response policy. This may lead to a more adaptable approach to emergencies. However, DFID has not yet taken forward the wider lessons from its Syria operation on transitioning from a short-term emergency footing and does not yet appear to have engaged at a central level on how to use different types of financial instruments at different phases of a humanitarian response.

### **Build on DFID Syria's efforts to invest in reporting and data management systems that can be readily adapted to complex humanitarian operations**

DFID lacks a set of data management and reporting tools that can be readily adapted to the needs of complex humanitarian operations. While there is some exchange of experience between DFID country offices, this is not done in a systematic way. We therefore recommended that DFID should build on DFID Syria's reporting and data management approach to invest in more adaptable systems for the department more generally.

There has been little progress in the response to this recommendation. DFID Syria is still sharing its experience using its Cascade reporting tool (for results management). DFID's information management team is currently working with the Office for National Statistics on how to build a common DFID reporting tool, but this work is progressing slowly, in large part due to the need to ensure proper electronic information security protocols, particularly when connected to external organisations such as delivery partners.

# Conclusion

Despite the very difficult operating environment in Syria, DFID Syria has engaged proactively with ICAI's recommendations, with many positive developments. DFID is currently designing the 2020 DFID Syria programme portfolio: the design process provides a good opportunity to build on lessons learned and the progress already made. It will be important to ensure that learning from the past seven years of working in Syria will be sustained throughout the planned restructuring and relocation of the team – while at the same time overseeing the uninterrupted delivery of a complex portfolio.

# Summary of findings

| Subject of recommendation   | Recent developments   | ICAI's assessment of progress  |
|---|---|--|
| <p>As conditions allow, DFID Syria should prioritise livelihoods programming and supporting local markets, to strengthen community self-reliance.</p> <p>Government response: <b>Partially accepted</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Given the evolving and unpredictable nature of the conflict in Syria, DFID is unable to commit to expanding this type of programming for the time being, but is actively exploring ways to deliver more livelihoods programming going forward.</li> <li>DFID Syria is in the process of designing its 2020 portfolio and will produce a new Livelihoods Strategy in mid-2019.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We agree with DFID that livelihoods approaches are often not possible due to contextual factors and can only be pursued when conditions allow.</li> <li>The Livelihoods Strategy, once completed, will help better position DFID Syria to respond to contextual challenges in this sector.</li> </ul>                   |
| <p>Strengthen third-party monitoring to provide a higher level of independent verification of aid delivery.</p> <p>Government response: <b>Accepted</b></p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>DFID Syria has updated its third-party monitoring methodology. It has reduced the role of implementing partners in selecting site visit locations and introduced in-depth verification visits. It has increased the length of monitoring visits from one to two days and has also piloted three-day monitoring visits.</li> <li>Although constrained by the context, DFID now conducts monitoring in government-controlled areas.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are significant improvements under way in this area, some of which were already planned when ICAI made its recommendation.</li> <li>Early signs are positive. The changes are likely to produce higher-quality and less biased data for assessing project performance in a difficult setting.</li> </ul>          |
| <p>Support partners to expand their community consultation and feedback processes and ensure this informs learning and design.</p> <p>Government response: <b>Accepted</b></p>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>DFID Syria's response has so far focused on information gathering on current processes. These include a desk-based research project to map beneficiary feedback mechanisms and how these are used in Syria, and an assessment of DFID's delivery partner's monitoring and evaluation systems, including beneficiary feedback mechanisms.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Actions are at the learning and planning stage.</li> <li>The information gathered is expected to feed into the design of the 2020 portfolio.</li> </ul>   |
| <p>Identify ways to support the capacity of Syrian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to have more direct roles in humanitarian responses.</p> <p>Government response: <b>Accepted</b></p>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There has been little action in response to this recommendation.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Due diligence requirements are important and necessary to safeguard UK public money from fraud and misuse. Syrian NGOs are unlikely to be able to meet these requirements without concentrated assistance to address capacity gaps and set up sound administrative, financial and quality assurance systems.</li> </ul> |
| <p>DFID Syria should develop a dynamic research, learning and dissemination strategy.</p> <p>Government response: <b>Accepted</b></p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The response has been limited to refining the process by which DFID Syria staff propose research pieces. They are now also required to identify plans for dissemination.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The requirement for the Syria DFID staff to have a dissemination plan for their research projects is a good stop-gap measure, but does not remove the need for an overall learning strategy and established dissemination mechanisms beyond the efforts of individuals.</li> </ul>                                      |

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|--|--|--|
| <p>Collect and document lessons and best practices from the Syria response, to inform ongoing and future crisis responses.</p> <p>Government response: <b>Accepted</b></p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Conflict, Humanitarian and Security Department (CHASE) has led the effort to embed lessons from the Syria response into humanitarian policy and practice.</li> <li>• DFID's information/data analytics team has introduced a search engine that will allow staff to search more easily for projects and topics.</li> </ul>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The new search engine is likely to facilitate the collation of and access to lessons and experience across DFID.</li> </ul>   |
| <p>In complex crises, plan for a lengthy engagement from an early stage.</p> <p>Government response: <b>Accepted</b></p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DFID has outlined several actions to be taken by CHASE, including synthesising learning from various crises in order to streamline the government's humanitarian response policy.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutionally, DFID has not yet taken forward the wider lessons on transitioning from a short-term emergency footing to longer-term funding and staffing arrangements for protracted complex crises.</li> <li>• CHASE's synthesis exercise may lead to a more adaptable approach to emergencies.</li> </ul>   |
| <p>Do more to gather and synthesise evidence and disseminate lessons on what works in important programming areas.</p> <p>Government response: <b>Partially accepted</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The CSSF's global MEL plans include measures to consolidate Fund-level evidence to improve the understanding of what works in fragile and conflict-affected states.</li> <li>• A stabilisation guide has been issued and other learning exercises are nearing completion, particularly in the field of conflict sensitivity.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The CSSF has made great strides in its approach to learning. It now has a deliberate strategy to engage more with other donors and its implementing partners to generate and share learning.</li> <li>• The stabilisation guide is a comprehensive update of the 2014 <i>UK Approach to Stabilisation</i>. Systematic reviews of learning and analytical work, such as of the revision of 70 OSJAs, point towards a more rigorous, institutionalised approach to learning.</li> </ul> |





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