

ICAI follow-up: The UK's humanitarian response to COVID-19

A summary
July 2023

The Independent Commission for Aid Impact works to improve the quality of UK development assistance through robust, independent scrutiny. We provide assurance to the UK taxpayer by conducting independent reviews of the effectiveness and value for money of UK aid.

We operate independently of government, reporting to Parliament, and our mandate covers all UK official development assistance.

Individual review scores and what they mean



An adequate score means:

- Enough progress has been made in the right areas and in a sufficiently timely manner in order to address the core concerns underpinning ICAI's recommendations.



An inadequate score results from one or more of the following three factors:

- Too little has been done to address ICAI's recommendations in core areas of concern (the response is inadequate in scope).
- Actions have been taken, but they do not cover the main concerns we had when we made the recommendations (the response is insufficiently relevant).
- Actions may be relevant, but implementation has been too slow and we are not able to judge their effectiveness (the response is insufficiently implemented).

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Executive summary

ICAI's follow-up review is an important element in the scrutiny process for UK aid. It provides parliament 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, which helps to inform subsequent reviews. For each of the reviews included in the follow-up, we provide a score of adequate or inadequate, illustrated by a tick or a cross.

This document is a summary focused only on the results of the follow-up of our review of *The UK's humanitarian response to COVID-19*. The full follow-up report of all 2021-22 reviews, including overall conclusions from the process and details of our methodology and scoring, can be found on our website.

Findings

The UK's humanitarian response to COVID-19

FCDO has been working to protect programming on social protection from aid reductions and has been encouraging multilateral development banks to expand their activities on social protection. However, FCDO has not undertaken a formal after-action review of its COVID-19 response, instead relying on informal learning, which heightens risks that lessons will not be captured to inform future crisis responses. In addition, we are yet to see robust evidence that FCDO has expanded its support directed to local delivery partners. ICAI therefore judges FCDO's response to the recommendations from this review to be inadequate, and will therefore return to review action on outstanding issues in 2024.



ICAI's review of *The UK's humanitarian response to COVID-19* was published in July 2022 and scored the UK's aid response as green-amber. The review assessed two years of the UK's emergency response to the pandemic, from its onset in February 2020 until early 2022. It examined the relevance of the UK's priorities, the coherence of its set of responses, and the effectiveness of its action in saving lives, reducing suffering and supporting communities to build resilience.

The review found that the UK government had been quick to recognise and respond to the likely impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in developing countries, its efforts informed by experiences from responding to other recent health crises. The UK provided flexible funding, its response was coherent and coordinated, and it made a substantial contribution to saving lives and reducing hardship. Nevertheless, reductions to the aid budget in 2020 and (especially) 2022, and the merger of two departments to form FCDO, came at an inopportune time and hampered the UK response.

Table 1: ICAI's recommendations and the government response

Subject of recommendation	Government response
FCDO should undertake an after-action review of its COVID-19 response, to identify lessons on information management, management processes and programming options, to inform its future responses to complex, multi-country emergencies.	Accepted

To fulfil its commitment to localising humanitarian response, FCDO should make long-term investments in building national disaster response capacities, including mechanisms for directing funding to local non-state actors.	Accepted
Building on its past investments in cash-based humanitarian support and national social protection systems, FCDO should invest in flexible social protection systems which help the most vulnerable in times of shock.	Accepted

Recommendation 1: FCDO should undertake an after-action review of its COVID-19 response, to identify lessons on information management, management processes and programming options, to inform its future responses to complex, multi-country emergencies

The original review found that the UK’s response to COVID-19 drew on learning and experience from previous humanitarian crises and global health emergencies. For example, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa helped to highlight the importance of responding to the indirect social and economic impacts of an epidemic rather than focusing on the direct impacts. However, ICAI found that this knowledge was drawn from experienced individuals, and not institutionally captured and shared, limiting awareness of these lessons. We also heard that institutional knowledge on the COVID-19 response was being lost due to turnover of staff resulting from the departmental merger and aid reductions. ICAI therefore recommended that FCDO should undertake an after-action review of its COVID-19 response, to identify important lessons for future crises. FCDO accepted this recommendation, agreeing on the importance of learning, and noting its ongoing efforts to incorporate lessons learnt into its future responses to crises.

In responding to this follow-up review, FCDO noted that since the original review’s publication it has been working to identify common themes across multiple large complex crises, including COVID-19, Afghanistan and Ukraine. It also noted that FCDO’s Humanitarian Department has fed into wider Ukraine crisis lesson learning (including on staff welfare, staff agility and crisis doctrine), and that FCDO’s Humanitarian Response Group holds quarterly meetings dedicated to reviewing lessons for responding to crises.

ICAI judges the overall response to this recommendation to be inadequate. This is because, although there has been some effort to promote informal learning from the COVID-19 response, there has not been an after-action review. This heightens the risk that learning from the COVID-19 pandemic will not be captured and readily accessible to current and future humanitarian response teams to inform a future pandemic response.

Recommendation 2: To fulfil its commitment to localising humanitarian response, FCDO should make long-term investments in building national disaster response capacities, including mechanisms for directing funding to local non-state actors

Although the original review concluded that the UK worked closely with national and local governments in delivering its response, it also found little evidence that the UK’s approach helped advance commitments on reforming the international humanitarian system to direct more aid through national and local responders. ICAI therefore recommended that FCDO should focus on making long-term investments in building national disaster response capacities, including mechanisms for directing funding to local non-state actors. FCDO accepted this recommendation, noting that it continues to refine its approach to capitalise on the comparative advantage of local actors, as well as building their long-term capacity.

ICAI’s analysis of information shared by FCDO through this follow-up review concluded that since the report was published, the department has focused on protecting existing investments and ways of working (in the context of aid reductions) rather than developing new systems and approaches to support localisation. We also concluded that the department is not well set up to channel its own funding through multiple local actors, given human resource constraints and a limited risk appetite.

FCDO officials informed us of their sense that the department is on track to deliver 25% of its humanitarian support through local organisations, in line with its international commitments.¹ However, FCDO was unable to share robust data to confirm this progress, and noted that the department's systems do not currently allow it to track all funding channelled directly and indirectly to local actors. Given this lack of ability to track progress towards the commitments, ICAI judges FCDO's response to this recommendation to be inadequate.

Recommendation 3: Building on its past investments in cash-based humanitarian support and national social protection systems, FCDO should invest in flexible social protection systems which help the most vulnerable in times of shock

The original review noted that the provision of social protection payments for groups that were highly vulnerable to the effects of lockdowns were an important part of the UK's COVID-19 response. It also found that this support was particularly effective when it built on the UK's existing long-term support to national social protection systems. However, it also found that such national systems were not present in many countries, and where they did exist, they were not well aligned with cash-based humanitarian programming (which often targeted people not linked to national social protection systems). This hampered the COVID-19 response. ICAI therefore recommended that FCDO should continue to support flexible social protection systems which can be used to help vulnerable people during shocks. FCDO accepted this recommendation, noting that promoting flexible, shock-responsive social protection systems remains a priority for the department, alongside continued efforts to strengthen core national systems.

In responding to this follow-up review, FCDO noted that it has worked to protect programming on social protection from UK aid reductions, based on a recognition of its value in supporting responses to shocks. FCDO also noted that it is continuing advocacy to drive improved support for social protection through the multilateral development banks.

Overall, the response to this recommendation is assessed as adequate, although the development of systems will take time and is not helped by continued pressure on the ODA budget.

Conclusion

FCDO has been working to protect and promote social protection through its bilateral and multilateral channels, which is a welcome effort to ensure UK aid is supporting the most vulnerable hit by crises. However, because FCDO has not undertaken (and is not planning to undertake) a formal after-action review of its COVID-19 response, and we are yet to see robust evidence that it is expanding the localisation of its humanitarian support, we judge the department's response to the recommendations from this review to be inadequate. ICAI will therefore return to review outstanding issues in 2024.

¹ At the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, in Istanbul, more than 30 development agencies – including the former DFID – signed up to a wide range of commitments on improving the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance, including a commitment to ensure that 25% of humanitarian aid is delivered through local and national responders as directly as possible, see *The Grand Bargain and Localisation Commitments*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, n.d., [link](#).



This document can be downloaded from www.icaei.independent.gov.uk.

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