

Supporting early warning systems in fragile and conflict-affected settings:

Lessons learned from the WISER Programme in the MENA region

Summary of recommendations

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Disclaimer:

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Communities in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS) are disproportionately affected by extreme weather and other disasters. At the same time, they are among those least served by the early warning systems (EWS) that could help protect them. The UK Met Office's WISER programme (Weather and Climate Information Services), funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), aims to improve weather and climate information services and close gaps between service producers and users, with a particular focus on national meteorological and hydrological services (NMHS) and humanitarian organizations, respectively. In FCAS, the programme is navigating complex operational environments that require adjustments to established ways of working from both donors and implementing partners. The following recommendations emerged from lessons learned on WISER's work in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and are intended to inform future iterations of the WISER programme as well as other EWS programming in FCAS.

Funding mechanisms and grant management processes

Given the volatility and complexity of operational environments in FCAS, funding structures and grant management processes need to enable adaptive management approaches. In line with localization objectives, the following recommendations also address opportunities to strengthen the involvement of local actors in EWS programming:

- **Provide funding to local actors and in-country teams:** Local and national partners play a crucial role for the implementation of EWS projects in FCAS, including NMHS, local civil society and in-country offices of international organizations; they should receive direct financial support where feasible. Where restrictive banking environments limit financial transfers to local actors, international organizations can act as intermediaries. WISER's Small Grants initiative presents a useful model for low-threshold funding to local actors.

- **Enable flexibility through simplified logframes, no-cost extensions and contingency funding:** Disruptions and adjustments to project implementation strategies are commonplace in FCAS. Simplified requirements for the theories of change, logframes and similar planning frameworks allow grant recipients to use their expert judgement on the adjustment of individual activities without lengthy administrative processes. Unbureaucratic processes for no-cost extensions and dedicated contingency funding are important tools to enable continued progress towards programme objectives as local realities shift.

- **Review administrative burdens linked to contracting and reporting:** Pre-award administrative processes like due diligence and contracting can accumulate into significant administrative burdens, particularly for local actors. High requirements related to reporting frequency and formats create an additional drain on implementing partners' resources. Simplify processes where possible and provide administrative support to local actors to navigate complex processes where necessary.

Adaptive programme management

Programme managers among donors, fund managers and implementing partners should be familiar with the challenges of implementing projects in FCAS, and the basic principles of adaptive programme management. The following recommendations will additionally support their work:

- **Require comprehensive risk assessments for large-scale projects in FCAS:** Conflict-related and other risks can affect project activities and the capacity of implementation partners in myriad ways. A clear overview of these risks, alongside their implications for project implementation, is a crucial foundation for large-scale projects, and needs to be continuously reviewed and updated throughout the implementation process. Conflict sensitivity risks deserve special attention to ensure EWS projects do no harm in FCAS.

- **Diversify the set of actors in project consortiums:** Conflict escalations and other shifts in FCAS affect actors differently, based on their initial capacity, resources and mandates. A mix of organization types, including community-based partners, increases the options to pivot between leading implementation partners as individual consortium members may become temporarily unable to engage. Building on local organizations with existing expertise (e.g., in training or procurement) helps enable more continuous project delivery.

- **Conduct mid-term reviews following substantial project adjustments:** If significant project adjustments are needed due to major escalations or other shifts in the operational environment, donors should allow for additional time to conduct a mid-term review. This should include a review of project planning and budget allocations, given the new local situation, and include all project partners.

Project implementation

On the implementation side, both international and local partners can take steps to make their activities more resilient to conflict-related disruption, to protect their staff from security risks, and to ensure project activities do no further harm in the context. Donor programme design can support these efforts through the following recommendations:

- **Conduct periodic risk assessments based on continuous monitoring and local insights:** Risk assessments during the proposal phase need to be periodically reviewed and reassessed, ideally based on the local insights and expert knowledge of local partners. Project planning, risk management and implementation strategies may need to be revised in line with the new assessments.
- **Include an inception phase to refine project plans:** A formal project refinement period at the start of the project provides an opportunity to (re)assess operational feasibility and update context analysis with local implementation partners, particularly if local partners were not involved in these processes during the project development stage. The inception phase should also include stakeholder and landscape mapping, to identify overlaps with other initiatives, avoid duplication and identify opportunities for collaboration.
- **Encourage regular conflict sensitivity reviews of project activities:** Project implementers should regularly review and assess current and planned project activities for conflict sensitivity risks, including reflections on the potential impacts of choices made regarding project delivery, for instance in training programmes, the selection of interlocutors or procurement decisions. Conflict sensitivity-related issues may be included in reporting requirements to ensure systematic assessments.
- **Empower local partners without transferring risks:** Local actors in FCAS are often more agile than international organizations and able to base their activities on more nuanced local risk knowledge. However, they still need to be supported in managing security risks through dedicated budget lines and contingency planning towards the protection of staff from physical and mental harm. Where in-country engagement is not possible, local partners should still be able to benefit from regional initiatives if available, e.g., capacity building activities.

Collaboration, coordination and communication

Coordination and communication challenges in large-scale programmes may not be specific to FCAS; however, conflict and volatility make them more consequential – where the operational environment can shift quickly, close coordination and effective communication become more important, as they enable partners to make fast adjustments and stay flexible in implementation.

- Develop clear programme coordination structures and clarify roles: Coordination mechanisms and responsibilities need to be agreed upon among programme partners early on. This includes open conversations on the administrative work required by different partners, and whether this is proportional and in line with their institutional capacities, to avoid challenges later on.
- Co-develop projects to build on local systems and capacities: Involving local partners from the onset increases the local relevance of project objectives, builds ownership among local partners and ensures that project activities build on pre-existing systems and capacities. Local partners may, for instance, be able to speed up administrative processes with local governments, and close information gaps in data scarce regions.
- Enable efficient coordination through short lines of communication: Short lines of communication between grant managers and local grant recipients, or between technical staff across different organizations can significantly speed up coordination processes, related to both practical project implementation and administrative processes, such as reporting. Where possible, communication should make use of locally preferred channels, such as instant messaging apps.
- Factor in the importance of relationships and trust-building: Trust-based relationships are critical for transparent coordination and communication among programme partners, for instance, relating to implementation challenges and budget constraints. Face-to-face meetings emerged as most effective in building such relationships and should be prioritized in programme planning where feasible. Workshops may have to be organized in stable and visa-friendly third countries.