HARP Facility Operations in Protracted Crises

I. Overall context and overview

Over 80% of the conflicts in the world today are protracted crises, with the majority including restricted access to some or all areas of work for international agencies. Delivering aid in such contexts requires a great reliance on local staff and partners, adapted Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to ensure accountability, and innovative ways of ensuring aid gets to the right people. This is not new: humanitarian actors have had to develop innovative mechanisms to deliver aid in protracted crisis for years, with the added pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020. Mobile money as a way to get cash to communities on a large scale in East Africa, and the use of GPS tagging to confirm aid delivery in Syria are just two examples of such mechanisms.

The efficacy of remote working in protracted crisis is well documented in studies and lessons learned and has resulted in a robust evidence base and tried and tested tools to improve operational modalities in this context. One key learning is that remote management requires to rethink the relationship between international agencies/donors and national organisations as a *partnership* in which donors continue to take responsibility for compliance and accountability rather than delegate that role to the smaller, national organisations that carry out the work. Context-specific SOPs should establish the modalities of this partnership, with clear methods of working that are understood and agreed upon by all parties. Another learning is the need to factor is some flexibility in programming, to respond to the fluid and rapid contextual changes that characterize protracted crises.

The imperative of remote partnerships in Myanmar
In Myanmar, the layered dynamics of conflict, displacement, increasing needs, poor humanitarian access, COVID-19 and the February 2021 military coup d'état have increased humanitarian partners reliance on remote partnership models.

The operational implications of the coup are immediate and serious: state-led services across much of the country have stopped, with health being particularly affected, while the risk of COVID-19 persists; aid operations are stalled due to the collapse of banking services and the military shut down of any informal cash mechanisms, with vulnerable populations not receiving the life-saving assistance they depend on; humanitarian needs are growing beyond the coup hotspots, as the military crackdown against peaceful protestors turns increasingly violent.

Post-coup, donors and international organisations are more reliant than ever on national partners, including those HARP-F funds indirectly (i.e., through INGOs), alongside the moral requirement not to support those in favour of or directly involved in the coup. We therefore must enable our partners to monitor this, and their own work, with an appropriate and efficient set of tools and support.

At the time of writing, public safety in Myanmar has deteriorated significantly and many embassies and international organisations are withdrawing staff to the region or to home locations. Inside Myanmar, staff are working from home and national staff are having to work flexibly, where they can work at all. This increases the level of distance from the funding partner to the

> **Myanmar's complex, protracted crisis**
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> Myanmar has experienced varying degrees of crisis since independence. Long-standing ethnic armed conflicts are frequently characterised by violence, human security concerns and poor and politicised/militarised access. Decades of military rule, interspersed with occasional, compromised, democratic governments, have seen significant human rights and IHL violations across the country.
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> Both Rakhine and Northern Shan State have seen ongoing and increasing conflict for many years, are in the throes of a protracted crisis and experience constant spikes in humanitarian need, especially Rakhine. Both states have very limited access for agencies across the regions, and limitations of assessments and reporting from those who do have access. The COVID-19 outbreak has added another dimension to an already volatile context.
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> In Rakhine (as of end March 2021), there is less reaction to the coup than elsewhere. But it remains difficult to gather reliable information on needs in Rakhine, and particularly in NRS and there is real concern about an increase in armed conflict. Humanitarian needs were already severe and coverage of services in displacement camps is poor. The risks of a further deterioration, beyond an already dire situation, are huge. In Kachin and Northern Shan states, armed groups have reacted to the coup and conflict between the Myanmar military and the KIA are at their highest levels in some time. Armed groups (the KIA included) are allying themselves to the protest movement, and the risks of conflation of violent repression of protestors with ethnic conflict is growing across Kachin, NSS and Kayin.

beneficiary and makes the role of independent intermediaries all the more important. While this represents a backward step for Myanmar, it is not unusual in protracted crisis settings, and SOPs and best practices exist for remote operations under similar conditions. HARP-F has developed an approach to work in this context.

II.   The HARP-F approach

1.   **Build trust** - The HARP-F approach relies on a trusted relationship with national partners. HARP-F builds – rather than replaces – the national capacity to lead the response. We empower national partners to take a 'can-do' attitude and support them to adopt operating systems – in procurement, financial management and safeguarding – to ensure they always meet the highest standards of delivery even as the conflict, access, political or health situation deteriorates. This does not mean we take unnecessary risks: we know what our red lines are, as do our partners, and we will stop and adapt when those triggers manifest.

In Rakhine, through our localisation agenda and delivery, we have established strong relationships with relevant local actors with a high level of mutual trust, as a result of having staff working directly with these partners on all aspects of their work. In Northern Shan, we are working with a network of local CSOs, which allows us to be quick and nimble in our response. Our coup response builds on the network and support that HARP-F refined for its COVID-19 response, but given the unpredictability of the situation we have placed additional emphasis on emergency response funding.

2.   **Enhance the due diligence process** - Adapted due diligence procedures allow us to look at how much money partners can absorb and grant accordingly. As reliance on downstream partners increases, and as political risk appetites from donor HQs potentially decrease, enhanced due diligence procedures conducted by independent partners such as HARP-F can provide an additional layer of reassurance that capacity challenges are flagged; equally they can increase donors' confidence in the capacity of increasingly smaller, more community-based organisations to deliver the response.

3.   **Roll out the Remote Partnership Programming (RPP) Toolkit** – Adapt the toolkit to fit the partner and the particular context they are working in. Some may be delivering aid directly, others may have smaller partners or staff doing it, others may need to work with the camp management committees. The toolkit includes alternative Standard Operating Procedures for remote management programming contexts in conflict to support partners in a conversation on shared risk with donors/funding mechanisms. For every stage of the project cycle, from partner identification to evaluation, we suggest procedures to ensure partners can adhere to standard accountability practices in these challenging settings. Below is a summary of the suggested SOPs.
The Toolkit also includes HARP-F approaches to Remote Management Programming (RMP) for partners applying for funding, Additional expected Due Diligence for downstream partners in RMP contexts in conflict and a Guidance note for HARP-F partners on Duty of Care for National Humanitarian Workers in RMP contexts in conflict in Myanmar. The full Toolkit is available here.

HARP-F Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for Remote Partnership Programming

HARP-F recommends that Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) be adapted to meet the specific requirements of remote partnership programming. HARP-F's guidance note on Adaptive SOPs include the following recommendations:

   i.   Needs Assessment: Adapt methodologies to address potential data gaps, triangulating data between several partial sources, instead of a single assessment, to provide reasonable justification for an intervention.

   ii.   Financial processes and documentation: Additional financial information may be required as an evidence base for payments, where previous means of verification can no longer be achieved. These could include offline versions of timesheets, exchanges of notes with the funding agencies in lieu of receipts, which may be temporary measures until such documentation can be gathered and verified. Furthermore, funding agencies and partners may need to approve additional bank accounts or financial transfer agents to ensure continuity of payments if existing banks are unable or unwilling to handle funds. With new banking procedures being introduced by the Myanmar authorities almost

weekly, and with some organisations working through non-banking arrangements, clear and simple audit trails are critical. It is important to ensure that risks of financial transactions (on-bank or off-bank) are clearly identified and understood: at present, this needs to be done on a case-by-case, transaction-by-transaction basis. For example, if partners are negotiating transactions with banks on a case-by-case basis, this presents a level of risk for the sender, the bank, and the beneficiary, which need not be prohibitive but do need to be understood and authorised. Strong financial management procedures need to be applied: payment requests should be submitted and approved, and receipts provided, but the format and distribution of these may need to be adapted. Communication around financial transactions may need to be limited to encrypted media and not formal emails or messages.

i. Supply chain processes and documentation: Funding agencies may consider variances to procurement thresholds for certain items or situations to ensure swift movement of essential supplies. Also, direct procurement (no competition) may be authorised where the market is limited and expediency would be compromised.   This would be a temporary measure, held under review, and additional verifications or approvals may be required to offset the lack of competition.

ii. Beneficiary feedback and reporting mechanisms: Reporting mechanisms will be simplified to focus on priority results and activities. Likewise, progress and payment milestones may be simplified. Partners will continue to prioritise beneficiary feedback and ensure that mechanisms for beneficiaries to provide feedback are suitable in context (i.e., not web-based).

iii. Grant management: Due diligence of new partners may be adapted to address capacity constraints specific to the remote programming context. Agreements, reporting templates, financial reports can be simplified to focus on essential requirements and may be translated into local languages, some of which has already been done with Enabling Grant partners. During the coup, we have reduced reporting requirements and been flexible with partners on deadlines. However, we remain focused on receiving information that provides us, and the donor, with the appropriate level of assurance and compliance.

iv. Monitoring and Evaluation: HARP-F uses an interactive platform which is simple and allows the capture of information from partners in several ways suitable for remote programming. This platform can be found here: PowerBi HARP-F MEAL Dashboard. See below text for more information.
Funding agencies' MEAL plans will be adapted to aim for verification in areas where partner face particular challenges. Alternative or proxy indicators, sources and means of verification may be used by the funder and/or the partner to ensure that performance can be monitored. Third party monitoring may be an effective methodology, particularly where enumerators can be hired from targeted areas and are trusted by affected populations.

III.   The HARP-F systems enabling remote partnership programming

1.   Information from a variety of sources - The need to constantly adapt requires an ongoing knowledge of evolving situations. Our partners are crucial sources of information. We have also established CASS[1] , a web-based platform and email service set up to provide real time, independent contextual knowledge in Rakhine. HARP-F itself is also a reliable source of information given staff and partner networks in all our current and previous operational areas. Using established and simple communications tools, we gather a huge amount of contextual information that informed our humanitarian scenarios, needs assessments and situation reports.

2.   Technical assistance for humanitarian response - Myanmar has, until now, been a predominantly developmental context even though humanitarian needs and programming has been present and steadily increasing over the past five years. The coup requires a new approach, placing humanitarian ways of working at the forefront of donor strategies. In protracted crises, 'humanitarian ways of working' do not only mean short-term, emergency interventions. Rather, life-saving results can be delivered at scale over time, while projects and organisations adapt to the change in context. HARP-F provides national and international technical assistance to support its partners to operate in accordance with donor expectations and in line with the capacity building and training we offer. As we respond to the coup, this assistance can also be provided to the wider sector to support adaptive programming behind a common strategy.

3.   Monitoring, evaluation, and best practice - Remote management applies, if anything, higher standards of oversight, accountability, monitoring and evaluation. The HARP-F MEAL team uses the raw data gathered

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[1] Access is password protected.

from partners, CASS, and our own monitoring to provide assurance that the response is on track, to adapt if it is not, and to learn lessons on how a remote and locally led response is working. In light of the coup, we are reviewing how we can apply our learning from previous responses and methods of delivery to provide a learning resource for Myanmar humanitarian organisations once HARP-F ends. This includes research on topics such as localisation, national-led emergency response, remote partnership programming, and evidence-based needs assessments in key response areas (nutrition, WaSH, cash/food, protection).

4.   **Communication -** We are developing a learning platform bringing together the data, evidence, contextual analysis, and expertise generated by our partners, CASS, and other sources to foster learning on what works, and how, for humanitarian programming in protracted crisis. The learning platform will help inform programming, feed into advocacy efforts led by HARP-F or the UK in humanitarian forums, and support policy and practice change. While our public communications have been put on hold following the coup, we have a new website built around our knowledge sharing agenda. It will showcase the work our partners are doing, share evidence built on our knowledge to support advocacy, and include a repository for the best practice papers and evaluations we are conducting.

5.   **Safeguarding** - We take a zero-tolerance approach to any actions or behaviours which may jeopardize the well-being and rights of our staff, our partners, and the communities we serve. We will take all possible steps to prevent harm from potential, actual or attempted abuse of power, authority, trust, or vulnerability, especially in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse. For us, this also includes bullying, harassment, victimisation, discrimination, personal attacks, physical or verbal abuse. See HARP-F policies on safeguarding.

6.   **Supply chain -** Reliable supply chains are essential as crises deteriorate. These often become blocked or compromised by actors invested in the crisis and national partners provide a critical link in ensuring that supply chains remain operational, as large-scale international operators (UN agencies, INGOs) access becomes increasingly restricted. In Rakhine and Northern Shan, we will conduct a supply chain assessment to gain an understanding of the effectiveness, limitations, and surge capacities of existing supply chains into Rakhine state and identify options where available for bolstering supply chain reach and efficiency. The supply chain assessment will be coupled with rolling market assessments to track the availability of essential commodities and prevent stock-outs.

7.   **Continuous improvement -** Our support for remote management approaches, increasingly led by national partners, further builds the capacity of those national partners. By providing remote management tools and techniques, and by embedding staff within certain partner organisations, HARP-F ensures that we work through the programme delivery cycle alongside our partners and are able to tailor our inputs to their capabilities. Doing so improves their capability to respond, with greater scope, in the future.