

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The change of government in Afghanistan in August 2021 following months of violent conflict led to mass displacement and loss of life and livelihoods. The UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) projected in December 2021 that in 2022, 22.8 million Afghans (55% of the population) would experience crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity. Since then, despite significant volumes of emergency assistance, there has been little improvement in the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. In response to the crisis, the Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC) launched an emergency appeal for funds to the public in December 2021 (<https://www.dec.org.uk/appeal/afghanistan-crisis-appeal>). CAFOD also made funding available from its own Afghanistan Crisis Appeal. CAFOD's DEC-funded response has been implemented in two phases, beginning in December 2021, in partnership with an international agency (main partner henceforth), which worked through four local implementing partners. Phase one of the response targeted three provinces that were heavily affected by drought, conflict, and food insecurity. The second phase in the same provinces included a greater focus on resilience-building through cash for work activities. In July 2023, external factors prevented the main partner's local partners from working in one location. CAFOD funded another partner for a food aid project in Balkh, using the remaining DEC funds. Meanwhile, CAFOD's broader Afghanistan appeal has supported emergency projects implemented by seven of CAFOD's national and international partners working in Afghanistan, which have focused on cash, food, non-food items, resilience, water and sanitation work.

Evaluation Overview

The purpose of the evaluation is to reflect on the programme, learn lessons, and ensure accountability to donors, partners and project participants. The key objectives are: i) To objectively assess effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, impact and sustainability; ii) To assess how projects engaged the affected population and the application/adherence to commitments of the Core Humanitarian Standards and SPHERE standards, and other National clusters standards like Cash and Voucher Working Group and FSAC; iii) To identify examples of good practices, challenges, lessons learned and critical gaps in the project implementation with the focus of providing recommendations for programme quality improvement in future project, as well as for general organizational learning, iv) To reflect on CAFOD's wider programme and portfolio in terms of complementarity, ultimate impact of the programme and the changes it made to the lives of project participants, and its alignment with and contribution to the strategic objectives of CAFOD's response and how these in turn supported the strategic objectives of CAFOD's long-term Afghanistan programme, v) To evaluate the efficacy of CAFOD partnership approach and model and added value in supporting the response, the impact of the response for partners' organizations, the extent to which partnerships were transformational and had lasting impacts, and the extent to which CAFOD's programming was supportive of partners' strategic directions; vi) To evaluate the response of CAFOD and CAFOD's partners in the emergency appeal, to changes in the political context and the dilemmas these posed for ethical and effective programming, and to identify specific lessons for CAFOD's future work with partners in the challenging context in Afghanistan.

The review used the four humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity¹ and the nine CHS commitments as the main pillars of its analytical framework. In addition,

¹ https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/who/european-consensus_en

the review integrated the following standards and frameworks at the sub-questions level or as additional dimensions to guide the analysis: External challenges and advocacy, visibility, and access issues; Grand Bargain Commitments; Sphere standards; and Do No Harm/Safeguarding.

The review team developed a light and flexible information collection approach which included a documents review, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The field work focused on DEC-funded work with one exception. The evaluators took steps to ensure that the review respects and protects the rights and welfare of the people and communities involved and to ensure that the review is technically accurate and reliable, is conducted in a transparent and impartial manner, and contributes to organizational learning and accountability. The review team also adhered to the NGO and CAFOD Codes of Conduct². The key challenges faced during the evaluation included delays in permission for the evaluation from national and provincial authorities; problems in transferring funds to Afghanistan due to global financial restrictions on Afghanistan; the rough terrain during the winter that made the movement of local evaluation teams in the communities difficult and time-consuming.

Findings

The analysis during the evaluation on the nine CHS commitments and other issues shows that the CAFOD response has largely been relevant, timely, efficient, and effective. The key conclusions for the CHS standards and other key issues reviewed were as follows:

CHS 1: Appropriate and relevant aid

All the projects focused on the most vulnerable groups in communities. However, the focus on the most vulnerable regions, communities and families must be documented more clearly in needs assessment reports and proposals to ensure transparency and accountability, especially CAFOD-funded national partners.

CHS 2: Timely and effective aid.

There were some delays in some communities in receiving time-bound services such as support for kitchen gardening for women due to late approvals by authorities. Following the global financial restrictions faced after the fall of the Ghani regime, partners faced delays in transferring funds to Afghanistan. Some delays also occurred due to lack of agency emergency preparedness plans among both DEC and CAFOD-funded partners, time required to develop consensus on programming and the lack of clear policies on using alternative funds transfer options.

CHS 3: Do-no-harm and increased resilience.

Both DEC and CAFOD funded partners have strong safeguarding policies and communities largely reported no harm to them from project work. There were conflicts in one DEC-funded province with non-recipient families which suggests the need for clear selection criteria and their communication. The different projects helped communities become more resilient against future emergencies, e.g., flood mitigation structures and drought-resistance income activities such as in DEC funded projects. However, given their high vulnerability to multiple hazards, much more DRR work is needed to build their resilience to future shocks.

CHS 4: Access to information, communication and participation.

² <https://www.ifrc.org/our-promise/do-good/code-conduct-movement-ngos>

The establishment of community-based organizations helped immensely in mobilizing communities, helping in identifying the most deserving beneficiaries, assisting in distribution of services, maintaining project infrastructure and resolving problems. In all provinces the majority of respondents expressed at least partial satisfaction on “Access to Rights, Information and Participation.” A key FGD observation was that after the start of the project and formation of village committees, interaction of agencies with the rest of the community decreased considerably though committees kept them informed. Men and women expressed similar levels of satisfaction with participation across all provinces.

CHS 5: Access to complaint mechanisms

Household survey responses on complaint mechanisms reveal satisfaction in all provinces across both men and women though most men in Takhar expressed dissatisfaction with the redressal of their complaints which mainly related to inadequate aid due to budget constraints. People were usually more satisfied where multiple complaint methods were instituted, as in DEC projects. Thus, some improvements are needed in terms of use of multiple channels of complaints, and summarizing, and analyzing complaints. Finally, it is also critical to make people aware about the broad range of issues that they can make complaints on, including gender and inclusion, community respect and dignity, technical standards and quality issues so that the complaints are not just focused on delays, inadequacy and non-provision.

CHS 6: Coordinated and complementary assistance

The UN-led working groups in Kabul and provinces are the main platform for coordination on technical, logistical, informational and strategic issues of relevance for all aid agencies. The other key platform is ACBAR which is a national, independent, non-government organization (NGO). Partners used these platforms for identifying pressing needs and ensuring geographical coordination. However, in terms of gaining access and approval from the authorities, partners were still largely on their own. More engagement among CAFOD partners for information sharing, joint programming and capacity building and representation could help improve programme quality and reduce costs. At least two-thirds of both men and women in all provinces reported no duplication or lack of coordination among different agencies in the household survey while the rest reported some issues, such as on differing aid amounts.

CHS 7: Organizations learn from experience and reflection

Most agencies extensively used their learning from past programming in Afghanistan to inform their current response. With respect to documenting learning from the current crisis for the future, many partners undertook written learning exercises, especially national partners funded by CAFOD appeal, a summary of key learnings being as follows: importance of accurate beneficiary selection, community mobilization, strong coordination and use of effective complaint mechanisms. However, more systematic attention to learning issues by using globally used approaches such as those under CHS may help improve the quality of partners’ learning activities. Community-level data shows that there seems to be a need to monitor changing needs in communities more closely and make changes in project work accordingly.

CHS 8: Competent and well-managed staff and volunteers

CAFOD partners have all still managed to retain competent and skilled Afghan staff despite a large exodus of staff abroad after the fall of the Ghani regime. Communities were happy with the quality of

staff and their competence. There is a need to have staff with adequate linguistic skills to work with Uzbek and Pushto-speaking communities among all partners.

CHS 9: Managing resources effectively, efficiently, and ethically

The global restrictions imposed on Afghanistan after the fall of the Ghani regime led to delays of several months initially until CAFOD was able to develop alternative fund transfer modalities. There are also restrictions imposed by the authorities on the amounts that agencies can withdraw from banks within a month and cumbersome financial reporting requirements. The vast majority of men and women in all provinces were highly satisfied that there was no wastage of resources or misuse of funds. The funds were used well and spending was near 100% on DEC projects and all targeted outcomes were achieved

CAFOD partnerships

Given the shortage of high-capacity local partners and CAFOD's global emphasis on working through local partners, it has developed a strategy to respond to the 2021 crisis that strikes a balance between ensuring a rapid and large response to the huge crisis by working through its main partner for the larger DEC funds and working through local partners for CAFOD's own funds and building their capacity. CAFOD gives space to implementing partners in identifying programme areas and strategies in line with the CAFOD partnership principles of shared partnership objectives, equitable relationships, subsidiarity and participation. CAFOD requires national implementing partners to get major programme decisions such as procurement, programme areas and beneficiary selection, approved by CAFOD. In a few cases, some delays were reported by CAFOD-funded staff during a crisis. The longer-term national partners also mentioned the extensive capacity-building that CAFOD had undertaken for them in the past. However, given the high dislocation and high staff turnover since the crisis, the national partners especially all expressed the need for further capacity-building in key areas like accountability and climate-resilient work.

Based on the conclusions provided above, a few key recommendations are presented to CAFOD for implementation with its key partners in Afghanistan under the different CHS standards:

CHS 1: Ensuring focus on the most priority needs of the vulnerable groups

1. Provide technical assistance to the implementing partners, especially the smaller national ones funded through CAFOD funds, to undertake in-depth assessments and analysis to ensure a focus on the most vulnerable regions, communities and families and document their outcomes in detail in needs assessment reports and proposals to ensure transparency and accountability.
2. Encourage partners to prioritize community projects with long-term benefits, such as providing equipment for livelihoods (e.g., carpentry tools, tailoring machines, wheelbarrows, or livestock) rather than short-term food packages; address the urgent need for basic health clinics in villages with difficult terrain and remote locations to ensure timely access to medical treatment directly or through referrals; tailor the kitchen gardening component of the programme to be more effective in semi-urban areas, where beneficiaries can sell their produce in vegetable markets; consider alternative solutions for rural areas with limited market access.

CHS 2: Ensuring timely and effective aid through emergency preparedness plans

3. Develop detailed emergency preparedness plans in partnerships with key long-term emergency partners and communities that include a clear identification of key partners, key programme modalities, approaches and sectors; clear policies on using alternative funds transfer options and

other key programme and programme support issues to ensure timely and effective aid. Provide help particularly to the smaller national partners in this regard.

4. Distribute goods, services, or aid directly to beneficiaries' villages, avoiding placement in other villages or district centers to alleviate travel burdens on vulnerable populations.

CHS 3: Increasing community resilience through climate smart resilience work

1. Develop a long-term resilience programme along with key partners to strengthen the resilience of communities and reduce their vulnerability to disasters covering aspects such as establishment and capacity-building of community resilience committees, early warning systems, construction of community infrastructure and strengthening of climate-smart and disaster-resilient livelihoods options. Activities could include building water harvesting channels, protection walls, and training communities on community-level disaster preparedness.

CHS 5: Enhancing the effectiveness of complaint mechanisms

5. Provide technical assistance to partners to develop complaint mechanisms which provide multiple channels of complaints; summarize and analyze complaints for review by senior management and CAFOD to ensure that complaints made to the organizations are monitored by senior managers and donors to guarantee proper and attentive resolution; make people aware about the broad range of issues that they can make complaints on, including gender and inclusion, community respect and dignity, technical standards and quality issues so that the complaints are not just focused on delays and non-provision; and encourage beneficiaries and community members to voice complaints and suggestions with confidence that their feedback is confidential and will not adversely affect them.

CHS 6: Improving coordination among CAFOD partners

6. Encourage more collaboration among CAFOD partners for information sharing, joint needs assessments and programming, capacity building and representation to improve quality and reduce costs for all partners, especially in Kabul where almost all partners are based.

CHS 7: Encouraging the use of more systematic learning and monitoring by partners

7. Provide technical assistance to partners to give more systematic attention to learning issues by using global approaches that may help improve the quality of partners' learning and monitoring activities and ensure greater convergence in the quality of learning activities undertaken by different partners using CHS guidelines.

CHS 8: Deploying staff with appropriate language skills

8. Encourage partners to deploy project staff who speak the language of the majority in specific communities, especially in Uzbek and Pushto speaking communities.

CAFOD partnerships

9. Develop clear timelines for providing feedback and approvals to partners on key project decisions during emergencies and track adherence to it.
10. Given the high staff turnover since the crisis, develop a comprehensive plan for national partners for further capacity-building in key programme areas based on a detailed needs assessment.