Evaluation of the Standard Allocation Process (SAP) of the Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF) for Somalia

Summary of the Online Survey among NGOs
Carried out in May and June 2012

Following concerns that were raised by NGOs in various meetings about the recent SAP of the CHF it was agreed to collect input from NGOs through an online survey. This survey was set up by the Consortium with facilitation from the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project, Phase II (NHRPII) and thus with funding from ECHO.

The idea of the survey was not necessarily to produce data in accordance with academic standards but to elaborate further on the concerns that were raised in a semi-structured manner. It was further agreed in advance that organisations would remain anonymous and that the raw data of the survey would not be shared but only a summary to protect that anonymity.

The survey was widely circulated by sending the link out through the Consortium mailing list and by contacting organisations individually, including some that are not Consortium members. It was open from mid-May to mid-June and a total of 26 organisations participated.

In the survey, we asked organisations a number of questions and respondents had the option to check pre-defined answers and/or to submit an open-ended response to elaborate in more detail. Below is a summary of the responses we received. The focus here is less so on the quantitative side but much more on the qualitative side.

The responses overall paint a fairly balanced picture. Generally there is a great appreciation of the fact that there is pooled funding available through the SAP of the CHF, though there is also room for improvement on a range of issues.

We started by asking respondents if the CHF guidelines provided sufficient clarity in terms of geographical areas covered, priorities, administrative procedures, decision-making processes, time lines, etc. A total of 21 respondents stated that the guidelines provided sufficient or some clarity while five said that they only provided limited or insufficient clarity (one respondent ticked ‘not applicable).

In the open-ended response (OER) fields respondents expressed that the initial guidelines sent out late in 2011 provided less clarity though the revised guidelines sent out at the beginning of 2012 did provide sufficient clarity. Others included:

- The guidelines were quite clear on eligibility and the process there-of, which form the core of the application process. That was positive.
- The final CHF Guidelines version revised in Nov.2011 last year provides sufficient clarity that works for my organization and constituency.
• Geographical coverage was clear, although some of the district names did not agree with what we had and it seemed broad - then Patricia was asking us to be more specific, but the system would not allow it. Admin procedures were not clear & the process for uploading was painfully slow and redundant - so much so that our WASH coordinator was not successful in uploading our WASH proposal. The negotiation process required repeated revisions both online and to the proposal documents, which got very bulky after the first 2 revisions.

• In the first guideline that was issued it never had sufficient clarity; however there was a second one that had some clarity.

The next question asked to what extent respondents were aware of the process behind the allocations for each cluster as outlined in the guidelines. Six said they were fully aware, 11 said they were somewhat aware, nine said they were not at all aware (one clicked ‘not applicable). In the OERs a few respondents provided further elaboration about the fact that they are not aware of that process with one respondent saying that they were clear because they had sought clarification from OCHA.

After that we asked respondents if they agree with these allocations. While there is some level of acceptance, not all respondents agreed. Six said they fully agree, 10 said they somewhat agree, 5 said they neither agree nor disagree and four said they totally disagree (two clicked ‘not applicable’). In the OERs, some respondents expressed their acceptance with these allocations given the circumstances, giving credit to the fact that the SAP is a huge task. Others said they disagreed, especially with the fact that education has repeatedly received very little funding through the SAP. Others said the geographical areas were too narrow, especially with regards to Mogadishu where areas were included that saw a lot of activities from OIC and GoT already. Some respondents also said all clusters should focus on the same geographical areas to maximize impact and that way limit the ‘silo effect’.

We then asked if organisations encountered a situation where the Cluster Review Committee recommended a project for funding which ended up not being funded. Five respondents answered positively and 17 said they did not encounter this situation with this year’s SAP (three checked ‘not applicable’ and one skipped the question). When we asked if respondents were aware of the process behind that final, post-CRC allocation and if they had been given any explanations as to why their project was not funded despite the CRC recommendation. Most of the respective respondents expressed that they were not clear of the process behind the final allocation and that in most cases they were not given an explanation.

Though not exactly in direct response to this question, some respondents raised concern about the fact that Cluster Leads are also heads of UN agencies and that this is considered to be problematic. One example stated was the health cluster which is chaired by Unicef and most cluster members are Unicef partners which - it is believed – could potentially put other organizations that are not currently Unicef partners at a disadvantage.
We then asked organisations about their opinion on the fact that the final decision on what projects will receive funding through the SAP rests with the HC. Only two said they fully agree, seven said they somewhat agree, ten said they don’t really agree and six said this is totally unacceptable (one skipped the question). In the OERs respondents expressed concern about the fact that the final decision rests with only one individual which could lead to claims of that individual being biased which in turn is not be conducive to providing a transparent process. Especially in the context of Somalia this is seen as problematic and fear was expressed about the potential for accusations of corruption.

Suggestions included that the final decision should rest with three individuals instead who would have to justify and explain their decisions and allow organisations to appeal if necessary. Others however appreciated that the process may have been designed that way for very good reasons but added that these reasons are in turn not clear, while some also said that as long as the HC follows the recommendations of the Clusters they don’t see an issue here.

After that we wanted to know more about the quality of the feed-back organisations received from the Secretariat once the project was recommended for funding by the CRC. 15 respondents said the feedback they received was either very (five) or somewhat (10) competent, three said the feedback was not very (1) or totally (2) incompetent (with six checking ‘not applicable’ and two skipping the question).

When asked if the feedback from the Secretariat included comments of a technical nature that should be addressed by the CRC, ten respondents answered positively and seven negatively (seven checked ‘not applicable’ and two skipped the question).

When we asked organisations if the feedback from the Secretariat included comments that are unusual for donors to comment on, such as questioning the unit costs for various budget lines (e.g. for staff salaries or commodity prices), eleven said yes, six said no (seven checked ‘not applicable’ and two skipped).

In the OERs relating to this set of questions, respondents expressed the following concerns/remarks:

- We received too many questions from the Secretariat, many of them where a repetition of what we have already been asked by the Cluster.
- Depending on the sector, sometimes the comments from the Secretariat contradicted the Cluster remarks and were sometimes simply wrong/arrogant, but in this case, we complained and it was resolved.
- Some of the comments were about salary of the PM (that were inside the due %) and money to be paid to the workers on the field. Others were about the costs of banking charges and fees for service delivery of third-party contractors.
- The majority of the comments where relevant, however, some of them where ignorant of the Somali context and aloof to the geographical and contextual difference in this ‘zonalised’ country.
- Some were revisions requested by the Secretariat to come into line with cluster guidelines and these made sense. Many were small details that were unnecessary and required much effort and time on our part to justify and clarify - micro-management to an unacceptable level.
We then went on to ask questions about the database that was used for entering the project data. When asked if organisations encountered difficulties with the database, five said they encountered a lot of difficulties, 12 said they had some difficulties, four said they did not have difficulties very often and only two said they never had any (three skipped the question).

In the OERs, respondents mentioned that it the system was often not accessible, either because it seemed to have been down but also because internet connections in Nairobi are often not reliable enough to enter all the data and repeated attempts were necessary. Various respondents mentioned that some data fields were 'sticky' and the value first entered into a cell was impossible to be altered. When attempted, the same old value would appear despite saving the form with the new valued entered.

Others said they did not find the user interface to be very user friendly. Others however also expressed that the online database is appreciated as a tool to submit the required project data.

We then asked if organisations received support in case they encountered difficulties with the database and all 17 respondents that requested support stated that they also received support, either by phone, email or skype which was especially appreciated. This way, respondents said, almost all problems could be solved even though it meant additional workload and, in some cases, further delays.

It was also appreciated that organisations were given deadline extensions when technical difficulties with the database prevented a timely submission of all the required information.

We then asked organisations to compare the SAP to other humanitarian donors such as DfID, ECHO or ODFA. The responses were as follows:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Much better</th>
<th>A little better</th>
<th>About the same</th>
<th>Worse</th>
<th>Much Worse</th>
<th># respondents</th>
<th># skipped</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resources (e.g. staff time) required</td>
<td>6 (28.6%)</td>
<td>5 (23.8%)</td>
<td>2 (9.5%)</td>
<td>6 (28.6%)</td>
<td>2 (9.5%)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeliness of funding decisions</td>
<td>5 (22.7%)</td>
<td>7 (31.8%)</td>
<td>5 (22.7%)</td>
<td>2 (9.1%)</td>
<td>3 (13.6%)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of feed-back</td>
<td>3 (14.3%)</td>
<td>5 (23.8%)</td>
<td>4 (19.0%)</td>
<td>7 (33.3%)</td>
<td>2 (9.5%)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity on process provided beforehand</td>
<td>7 (33.3%)</td>
<td>1 (4.8%)</td>
<td>5 (23.8%)</td>
<td>6 (28.6%)</td>
<td>2 (9.5%)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
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The OERs painted an equally mixed picture. Some respondents reiterated that ECHO, DfID and OFDA are better at providing clarity beforehand or feed-back during the process and faster at issuing the funding decision. Others though used the OERs to state that they thought the SAP is overall easier a process as long as staff have some experience with it and that the SAP’s online database is easier than ECHO’s, for
example, mention also that DfID doesn’t even have an online submission system. Interestingly enough, one respondent, who was keen to point out that he works for a Somali NGO, mentioned that the SAP scores much higher on all accounts than any of their other donors which are all international NGOs.

OERs included:

- The Priorities and the Geographical areas of coverage to be prioritized were more clear. The Review process on the change of modality is also timely as it changes the mode of intervention in line with the particular humanitarian situation.
- Period given for uploading projects in the online system are exceptionally short. Deadlines given for addressing comments are as well short.
- Fewer problems with database crashing and losing information, some IT issues resolved. However, there were still conflicting, late, and changing guidance during the week of proposal preparation/ submission which is extremely unhelpful.

We then asked if organisations saw any improvements this year in comparison with last year’s SAP. Two said they saw a lot of improvements, eight said they saw some, three thought it was about the same, and two said that they saw no improvements or that this year’s SAP was worse than last year’s (seven stated ‘not applicable’ and a further four skipped the question).

We then asked of respondents were given ample time to address the comments from the Secretariat, ten said no, seven said yes (seven checked ‘not applicable’ and two skipped). In the OERs respondents mentioned that deadlines were too tight in some cases, others noted that this was necessary to avoid additional delays.

Lastly, we asked organisations to provide us with any additional comments they wanted to share with us which we would in turn bring to OCHA’s and the Advisory Board’s attention. These comments included the following:

- [Names of NGOs omitted] feels that the process for rating proposals has not been sufficiently transparent and clearly communicated. [Names of NGOs omitted] would highly appreciate more detailed feedback on why our applications were rejected so that we can utilise this information to draw lessons for any future applications.
- The CHF Standard Allocation Process must be strict in observing the set timelines and approved projects should be funded in the shortest duration possible so as not delay the implementation process and subsequently affect the viability of the project as the humanitarian situation keeps on changing.
- I don’t see any strategy integrated based on the needs. Mostly it looks like the allocations are made to keep all organizations happy. Consideration to the need in the ground and large projects to make impact (CHF Objective) is missing.
• The amount of support costs (staff, transport etc) authorised is not enough to cover all the support costs required to implement a project. It would be good to have more time to develop the proposal.

• Operational costs are too restrictive. If we compare to other donors, they allow us to cover real costs of the programme. For CHF, this is not the fact and we can't often implement standalone projects without covering some of the costs though other donors. This is obviously not ideal.

• Staffing expenses allowed are stringent and maybe even unrealistic, as are other operational expenses allowable. Quite a lot of human resource input is demanded for significantly few funds and a short project duration.

• The projects in the current SAP has been approved more than 6 weeks ago including ours, however, we have not yet received the contract. The preparation and signing of the contracts is taking long so far, be it at Geneva or Nairobi level. I am afraid the disbursement of the first instalment might also take as long or several more weeks (i.e., another 3 weeks after signature). This needs to be addressed.

• The database was not flexible so for example could not change locations, objectives on logframe etc. This made it difficult to tailor the submission.

• We are happy to be working with the Secretariat and through the CHF process. We appreciate the mechanism is meant to fast track the process, that is why we find it so frustrating that we've been delayed over a month now in micro-management negotiations.

• The fund has its own challenges which i think can be addressed. Currently it is the only fund where LNGOs have access to and its reach is widest. This has enabled the LNGOs to remain relevant while providing lifesaving support to communities in need.

Though we did not address the work of the clusters in this survey as it pertains to the SAP, respondents did note on occasion that satisfaction/dissatisfaction with some clusters is greater than with others. In the OERs, the work of the Health Cluster was mentioned numerous times as being very satisfactory. However, we do not have enough data to draw conclusion son that subject but me might want to consider looking into it in a separate, dedicated survey.

We also did not investigate differences between Somali and International NGOs but it nevertheless became apparent that the former especially appreciate the CHF as a major source of funding.

In conclusion, the SAP of the CHF is generally appreciated while a number of issues require some improvements to make it an even better tool to assist populations in need.

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