Evaluating BHA/Office of Africa's Regional Rapid Response Fund

As part of a wider effort to streamline disaster response in Africa, USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance / Office of Africa (BHA/OA) designed and piloted a Regional Rapid Response fund (RRF), intended to quickly meet humanitarian needs in the event of a rapid-onset crisis. As envisioned, the RRF would allow BHA to rapidly fund crisis response programming in countries where BHA/OA does not maintain steady state programming, or have an active presence. In 2019, three pilot RRFs were launched in Africa with the purpose of maintaining a 36-month program with stand-by capacity in East/Central, West, and Southern Africa. Through these RRFs, international as well as local organizations (through sub-awards) were supported to provide short-term, effective, and quick-impact interventions within a maximum of 90 days from the start of the response to meet acute emergency humanitarian needs.

The three main objectives of the RRF were to:

1. **Provide immediate short-term assistance to a sudden onset humanitarian crisis within 72 hours of a declaration of humanitarian need (DHN)**. The RRFs were intended to capitalize on limited windows of opportunity when the onset of sudden and acute needs overwhelm available resources and capacity to respond. Activities supported under this mechanism fell within specific BHA sectors and were pre-approved by technical staff to allow for immediate deployment of response activities once the mechanism has been triggered. The sectors included in the RRFs were selected according to expected humanitarian needs resulting from common shocks and stresses.

2. **Strengthen the capacity of local organizations to be able to better respond to disasters**. The programs were designed to build and strengthen the local humanitarian response capacity by nurturing lasting institutions, systems, and capacities to confront humanitarian and development challenges, including support of local NGOs. RRF partners provided technical assistance on programmatic, administrative, and financial aspects of sub-award implementation to subgrantees to respond effectively and efficiently to emergency needs of target populations, with the goal of eventually transitioning many new programs in the country to local relief organizations. BHA/OA anticipated this capacity building would take place when no response was triggered in the region, hence providing consistent and ongoing activities and funding for RRF partners and local organizations.

3. **Test the assumption that regional rapid response programs can enhance BHA's responsiveness as a bureau.** In 2022, following three years of RRF deployment in each of the regions, OA requested the assistance of the BHA Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) team to assess the efficiency and appropriateness of the RRFs in responding to rapid onset disasters to help OA make informed decisions on whether to continue with a regional RRF model, and if so,

to provide recommendations that would improve the design of future RRF programming to be shared with other geographic offices.

Internal Review Methodology: The BHA M&E team reviewed activity documents and reports, including BHA award management files and reports from implementing partners. The timeline from an onset DHN to approval of the response award for Africa's regional RRF was compared with other responses that followed the traditional response mechanism. Remote interviews were conducted with 20 BHA and 12 implementing partner in-country and headquarter staff. Since this was a desk study, BHA's M&E team members were not able to speak directly with local NGO staff (subgrantees) or program participants. The internal review was a collaborative effort between the BHA M&E team and the Program Support team within the Office of Africa's Management and Integration Team (MIT), with members from both teams reviewing and verifying the results.

Key Findings:

1. While none of the regional RRFs met the planned goal of responding within 72 hours of a DHN, these programs were seen by both BHA and our partners as an important tool for response.

2. The RRF was specifically designed to build the capacity of local organizations for disaster response, however, at the time of the review, actual implementation of this component in the award was limited. While its inclusion in the design of the RRF model was seen as important and a strong contribution to USAID's localization goals, there was limited visibility on actual capacity built in disaster response among local organizations.

3. Some of the issues associated with the longer-than-expected response time were internal to BHA processes and have been raised as internal recommendations.

4. While all of the sectors included in the RRF were relevant to the regions, partners reported challenges in implementation. BHA staff also flagged the need for additional pre-approved activities within additional sectors.

Recommendations:

The review identified multiple recommendations to improve different elements of the regional RRF mechanism across design, scoping, management, and implementation. Most of the recommendations were focused on internal processes and procedures, especially for clear and consistent guidelines for BHA staff and implementing partners on when and how the mechanism will be used. The overall

recommendations for any future uses of the regional RRF mechanism can be grouped into three major categories:

1. **Streamlining of RRF process**: The RRF mechanism should itself be streamlined – the steps should be clearly delineated, focusing on those essential to apply for, approve, and implement rapid response programs. The process should be well socialized with BHA staff and partners, so that all involved in deploying the funds are aware of when it is used, what approvals are required, how to apply for and use the funds and how to balance speed with other considerations on the ground.

2. **Improved BHA/OA and IP communication**: Communication issues between BHA/OA and IPs/sub awardees created confusion around when these funds could and should be used, and how the approval process worked. The process for communication should thus be formalized at the outset, including the frequency of communications and meetings during a response. This structure would provide a clear outline of the protocol for use of the RRF, as well as the roles and responsibilities for implementing partners, sub-awardees, and BHA staff at each level. This would reduce delays caused by mismatched expectations and understandings of the process. The implementation process should be clearly communicated to any incoming staff (BHA and IP) within any portfolio handover. In addition, the regional RRFs should be awarded as cooperative agreements to allow BHA and implementing partners to work closely together toward successful implementation, and ensure BHA input into major decision points throughout the duration of the award.

3. **Explicit emphasis on capacity-building**: The capacity building component of the RRF should ensure a strong focus on localization. Both IPs and BHA should consider innovative ways to maintain local partner interest and engagement. For example:
   a. Build in needs assessments more explicitly as an RRF task, and build the capacity of local partners to conduct high-quality assessments;
   b. Build capacity for warehouse management by local organizations, including the pre-positioning of commodities;
   c. Provide funding for disaster risk reduction or anticipatory actions and include limited early recovery interventions as appropriate;
   d. Work with local partners in technical grant management areas to improve their capacity to manage and direct local responses;
   e. Provide funding that is specifically dedicated to local NGOs that would allow them to quickly respond to small, localized shocks that wouldn't rise to the level of a DHN.

Conclusion:

Overall, the regional RRF was seen as a positive attempt to shorten response time following a crisis. While BHA is not committed to a second iteration of the program, our staff and partners all agree that it would be worthwhile to try the RRF mechanism again, taking the recommendations from the report into consideration.