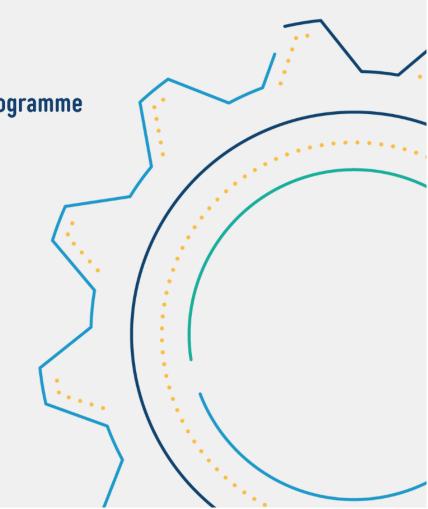# ELRHA'S RESEARCH FOR HEALTH IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES: IMPACT EVALUATION

Management Response

Commissioned by Elrha's R2HC Programme

Conducted by The Policy Practice

January 2024

ABOUT ELRHA

We are Elrha. A global organisation that finds solutions to complex humanitarian problems through research and innovation. We are an established actor in the humanitarian community, working in partnership with humanitarian organisations, researchers, innovators, and the private sector to tackle some of the most difficult challenges facing people all over the world. We equip humanitarian responders with knowledge of what works, so that people affected by crises get the right help when they need it most. We have supported more than 200 world-class research studies and innovation projects, championing new ideas and different approaches to evidence what works in humanitarian response. Elrha has two successful humanitarian programmes: Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC) and the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF).

RESEARCH FOR HEALTH IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES (R2HC)

R2HC aims to improve health outcomes for people affected by humanitarian crises by strengthening the evidence base for public health interventions. Our globally recognised research programme focuses on maximising the potential for public health research to bring about positive change in humanitarian response. Since 2013, we have funded more than 100 research studies across a range of public health fields.

Our Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises programme is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Wellcome, and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) through the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR).

The following management response considers the recommendations made by The Policy Practice, independent consultants, who conducted the evaluation.

Read the full Impact Evaluation

Read the Summary Report

RECOMMENDATION 1: CONTRIBUTING TO DECOLONISING HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND GLOBAL HEALTH RESEARCH

> **1.1** Ensure more low- and middle-income country (LMIC) representation on its governance mechanisms, the Advisory Group and the Funding Committee

Fully accepted. The Evaluation report has noted the expertise and value added to the R2HC through our Advisory Group and Funding Committee. We have benefited from exceptional support provided by members of both groups that has contributed to the quality and impact of our work. We agree however with the evaluation finding that our governance groups need to improve their diversity.

Elrha will review and revise its overall governance mechanisms in 2024 to ensure alignment with our new organisational strategy. As part of this review, we will review our Advisory Group and Funding Committee membership and identify experts from a diverse range of backgrounds, including those with lived experience and from crisis-affected countries, to ensure greater LMIC representation.

> **1.2** R2HC could benefit from developing a decolonisation strategy and position in line with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) agenda that has evolved (if haltingly in practice) since the Grand Bargain discussion in 2016 and current thinking about the decolonisation of global health

Fully accepted. We accept the recommendation to be guided by the IASC commitment to localisation of humanitarian action and the work of Grand Bargain signatories to advance the conversation towards anti-racism and decolonisation.

Elrha is committed to becoming an anti-racist organisation and to shifting the power within the humanitarian system from the Global North to the Global South. These are reflected in our long-term commitments in our 2023–2040 Strategy. We see racism and colonialism as being interlinked.

We will develop a paper outlining our understanding of shifting the power and anti-racism, including decolonisation, that will be used to inform an organisational plan. We will use our 2025 Research Forum as an opportunity to inform this paper.

As a research funder, we aim to set the highest standards in terms of adopting a decolonising approach to research and will incorporate best practice into our guidance and tools.

> **1.3** R2HC should investigate ways of changing its research calls to increase funding of LMIC-led research.

Fully accepted. The R2HC routinely reviews processes related to designing and implementing research calls and contracting processes, to improve access by LMIC researchers to our research funds. Our 2022 open research call involved new approaches and resulted in 38% of grants being awarded to LMIC-led research teams, compared to 13% in the previous two calls. But we aim to do even better.

We will actively seek funding that will allow us to generate locally-led research calls – calls that address local demand for evidence, identify local research priorities, and result in studies led by teams comprising local research and humanitarian actors. We envisage such calls will allow for the inclusion of expertise from institutions in the Global North, if such need is identified.

We will learn from research call models used by research funders, such as the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Wellcome and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, that demonstrate good practice, as well as other initiatives aiming to decolonise grant making practice.

In the longer term, we hope to identify LMIC institutions we can partner with to develop and oversee future research calls. This will require a higher level of resources than currently available, but we are committed to seeking new funding for such a purpose.

> **1.4** R2HC should deepen its understanding of evidence gaps, and research capacities, as well as what other research and capacity-building programmes and donors are doing in the regions where it works a lot.

Fully accepted. We will continue to identify evidence gaps through consultation with humanitarian actors and to support new research prioritisation exercises.

We will explore engaging with humanitarian actors at local level, and other actors engaged in humanitarian response and evidence generation, to ensure that identified priorities respond to local needs for evidence.

We will continue to use Steering Committees to guide specific pieces of work, recognising the importance of involving those who are closer to delivery of humanitarian response. They will include members from institutions in countries affected by crises, as well as global organisations involved in humanitarian decision-making and operations.

We are committed to better understanding the current research landscape. We will identify potential partners for collaboration to expand the scope of our activities, such as through capacity strengthening of researchers, and knowledge management and brokering.

> **1.5** While R2HC continues to fund some high income country (HIC)–led research, it is no longer consistent with key humanitarian priorities and best practices to do this without some formal capacity building requirements. R2HC needs to formally include this as a requirement in HIC–led research, including a logframe objective, indicators and milestones to hardwire this into the programme.

Fully accepted. We were pleased to see in the evaluation report that, despite R2HC not having a specific mandate for capacity strengthening, our funding has contributed to achievements in this area. Credit for this must go to our grantees' commitment to providing learning and training opportunities across their teams, as well as our own efforts to encourage inclusion and participation, such as through funding conference participation, providing seed-funding for partnership strengthening, and resourcing teams to attend our Research Fora.

We recognise the value of bi-directional capacity strengthening, and of strong, long-term partnerships for addressing societal challenges. All research teams we fund are required to include academics and humanitarian practitioners, because we know different actors bring complementary skills and expertise to each study. Such expertise must include local knowledge and cultural understanding, research skills and academic rigour, knowledge of what evidence is needed to inform humanitarian response, and the ability to influence policy or practice.

We know that the latest research methodologies and tools that exist in HICs are often not available to LMIC researchers, and that most studies provide opportunities for the upskilling of team members. We also know that training and skills sharing need resourcing. For future research calls, proposal applications will include sections for both narrative and budget which focus on capacity strengthening activities. We will develop metrics to measure how grantees perform against capacity strengthening objectives.

Our primary focus is on delivering quality research that gets used to improve humanitarian health policy and practice. We will consider how we can enhance our own capacity strengthening offer, perhaps through partnerships, recognising that other initiatives already exist to strengthen the capacity of LMIC academics.

RECOMMENDATION 2: STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT

2.1   R2HC's Donors: Advocating for the importance of research funding

Fully accepted. Our current funders are committed to supporting Elrha's efforts to diversify our funding base and to facilitate strategic connections with organisations that share our vision and values. We will actively pursue opportunities for connections through our funders.

2.2   R2HC, together with R2HC's Donors: Improving awareness of R2HC among a broader group of actors and potential donors

Fully accepted. Elrha has a new Business Development Strategy and is strategically targeting key donors with a view to securing and diversifying R2HC funding. We will pursue connections with foundations that share similar values and thematic interests to our own, and with institutional donors within the UK and beyond that are committed to funding research to improve humanitarian response.

We will establish contact with funders focused on health research in development settings and will promote R2HC achievements and outputs to persuade them of the importance of funding research in humanitarian settings. We will use the concept of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus as a way to encourage collaboration.

We will build on existing relationships with the World Health Organization (WHO), UN agencies, and international organisations, particularly those that are focusing on similar thematic areas to further raise awareness of the programme. We will explore opportunities for collaboration with the clusters at national level, recognising that most decision-making takes place in crisis-affected settings rather than at a global level.

2.3   Developing a clear engagement strategy that is focussed on raising and deepening awareness of R2HC with a new range of stakeholders and potential partners should be a short-term priority for R2HC

Fully accepted. We will strengthen our existing strategic engagement plan to reflect our ambition to engage with a wider range of stakeholders to meet our key objectives, prioritising potential partners and collaborators in LMICs and the humanitarian sector. We will continue to identify key events and opportunities to engage with these critical actors.

We will ensure R2HC external engagement objectives are embedded within Elrha's Impact and Engagement Strategy objectives and will maximise opportunities to build on existing connections within other parts of the organisation.

We will be targeted and judicious in our approach to external engagement, prioritising online communications channels, aiming to build partnerships with others who can act as our champions and advocates in countries outside the UK, and primarily engage in relation to specific projects and initiatives where we can have most impact.

2.4   Convening actors to commit to funding different research gaps.

Fully accepted. In thematic areas where R2HC has invested resources to identify evidence gaps, we will convene meetings or round tables with funders who may be interested in funding research calls, either through the R2HC or through other mechanisms.

At an organisational level, Elrha will do this to support our ambition to create equitable global and regional mechanisms to identify and resource locally identified research and innovation priorities.

RECOMMENDATION 3: COMMUNICATION AND DISSEMINATION

3.1   R2HC, together with its donors and Advisory Group: Clarify boundaries of what R2HC does

Fully accepted. The Elrha website will be updated in 2024. We will take this opportunity to reiterate what we do, what types of research we fund and in response to which types and stages of humanitarian crisis, to ensure a clear understanding within our stakeholder community.

We will continue to ensure that research calls provide clear guidance on these parameters in application forms and at all stages of the application process.

Our website update will also clearly articulate the relationship between Elrha and its programmes including cross-programme collaboration.

3.2   Improve the communication of findings by R2HC

Fully accepted. R2HC welcomes this recommendation and sees a clear opportunity to do more to communicate and broker research findings in future. It is already our practice to ask grantees to ground findings in the policy and practice context through mandatory Research Snapshots, and significance of findings is usually presented in relation to the status of evidence provided at proposal stage. We agree more could be done to articulate and communicate this to others. In the future we will ask grantees to comment on the novelty and significance of findings at the end-grant stage to enhance communications on research outputs.

We will build on the ad hoc support already provided to grantees, such as co-writing policy briefs, supporting press engagement, helping to workshop communications products or facilitate webinars.

Funds permitting, we will continue to provide Uptake and Impact Small Grants to enable grantees to identify opportunities for further communicating and promoting their research findings. We will link this with our aim to increase engagement with humanitarian actors and clusters. Our 2025 Research Forum and associated events in 2024 will also give us an opportunity to showcase critical new research.

We will also explore strengthening the way grants are structured to ensure adequate resource for communications on studies post-peer review.

Our relationship with grantees typically ends before research is peer reviewed which can subject us to communications constraints in relation to journal policies. For this reason, we believe our current approach of supporting skilled Research Uptake Focal Points in every study is critical, as these individuals can remain brokers and users of knowledge within policy and practice and countries affected by crisis, and are well placed to contextualise the research findings through engagement and direct application.

RECOMMENDATION 4: GRANT MANAGEMENT

> **4.1** R2HC, in collaboration with its Donors: Ensure that grants are of sufficient duration to achieve research objectives

Fully accepted. We will advocate for longer term funding in the humanitarian research sector and, for the next phase of the R2HC, will seek funding from donors able to provide multi-annual and/or flexible funding that will allow us to provide research grants of at least three years in length. We will also continue to fund shorter term studies, recognising that there is no optimal time frame for research and that sometimes rapid research is needed to address critical questions, such as during acute crises and infectious disease outbreaks.

We will continue our approach to flexible grant management. Where possible, we will allow no cost extensions for grants that face unforeseen challenges and to enable research uptake opportunities to be maximised. We will take a more proactive approach to working with grantees at the outset of their grants to assess their project timeline, drawing on R2HC's experience of common operational challenges and delays, and build in contingencies as appropriate.

> **4.2** Enlist the support of ethicists for grant management

Partially accepted. We recognise the imperative that research should do no harm and that an ethics 'lens' should be applied at all stages of the research process. This is reflected in our Research Ethics Toolkit.

All R2HC-funded studies are approved by at least one Research Ethics Committee. Ethics approvals are usually required both at national level (in the country where the study is taking place), and also by grantee institutions. We recognise that on occasion an ethical issue may be overlooked, or arise unexpectedly, whilst research is underway.

We welcome the recommendation that R2HC establish a mechanism to provide support and guidance on ethical issues to grantees. We will explore demand for such support from within the humanitarian health research community and the possibility of setting up a safe, anonymous system for consulting ethics specialists. We will also explore other opportunities for providing research ethics support.

4.3   Ensure local research partners can contact R2HC directly

Fully accepted. For new grants, we will ensure all research team members are invited to kick-off meeting calls, have access to our online onboarding course and are encouraged to sign up to receive grantee-facing emails. We will continue to promote our incident reporting (whistleblowing) guidelines and contact details. We will introduce a Partnership Health Check (see recommendation 4.4) which will seek partner views on their research partnership and the role R2HC could play to further support this.

4.4   Introduce mechanisms for tracking the equity of partnerships.

Fully accepted. Our research partnership approach to date has focused on promoting our partnership principles – equity, responsibility, mutual benefit, and transparency – for potential applicants and outlining at proposal stage how we expect grantees to meet these objectives. This includes encouraging the resourcing of partnership strengthening activities.

We welcome the recommendation that we should further track and monitor the equity of partnerships, acknowledging our role in providing guidance on equitable partnerships. We will address this recommendation in the first instance by providing a tool that will require grantees to self-assess the health of their research partnership, including equity, and will then determine whether further intervention from R2HC is warranted. We will also consult stakeholders to find out what other funders are doing in this area.

4.5   Understand capacities, opportunities and motivations for using findings in proposals and proposal review

Not accepted. We recognise the importance of capacity, willingness and motivation of research users to use research findings. Since 2022 we have taken the following steps:

> i) grantees are required to demonstrate demand for and intention of stakeholders to use research via letters of support with their proposals. Letters must set out why the research is important and relevant to stakeholders and how they intend to apply it in policy or practice.

ii) a narrative question in the grant application requests grantees to articulate the external demand for evidence and what they will do to meet it by brokering findings.

iii) Funding Committee and independent technical reviewers are asked to assess the proposal on 'demand for evidence' using the above information.

Based on the above, we consider that no further action is required in response to this recommendation.

Furthermore, recognising that on occasion the external context changes during a study – for example an election takes place – grantees are required to routinely monitor and report every six months on the external context and any risks arising for impact of their studies. They are also required to set out in their Stakeholder Engagement Strategy (finalised before dissemination stage) how they plan to respond considering any changes in context. We hope that when an evaluation is conducted of current grants, fewer grantees will experience the challenge of 'lacking political will' to implement research recommendations. We note however, that political will in general to act on humanitarian challenges, and resources to back it up, is often neglected.