

EDWORX CONSULTING  
COMMISSIONED REPORT

# ADVANCING LOCALIZATION AND PARTNERSHIPS IN HUMANITARIAN PRACTICE

JULY 2024



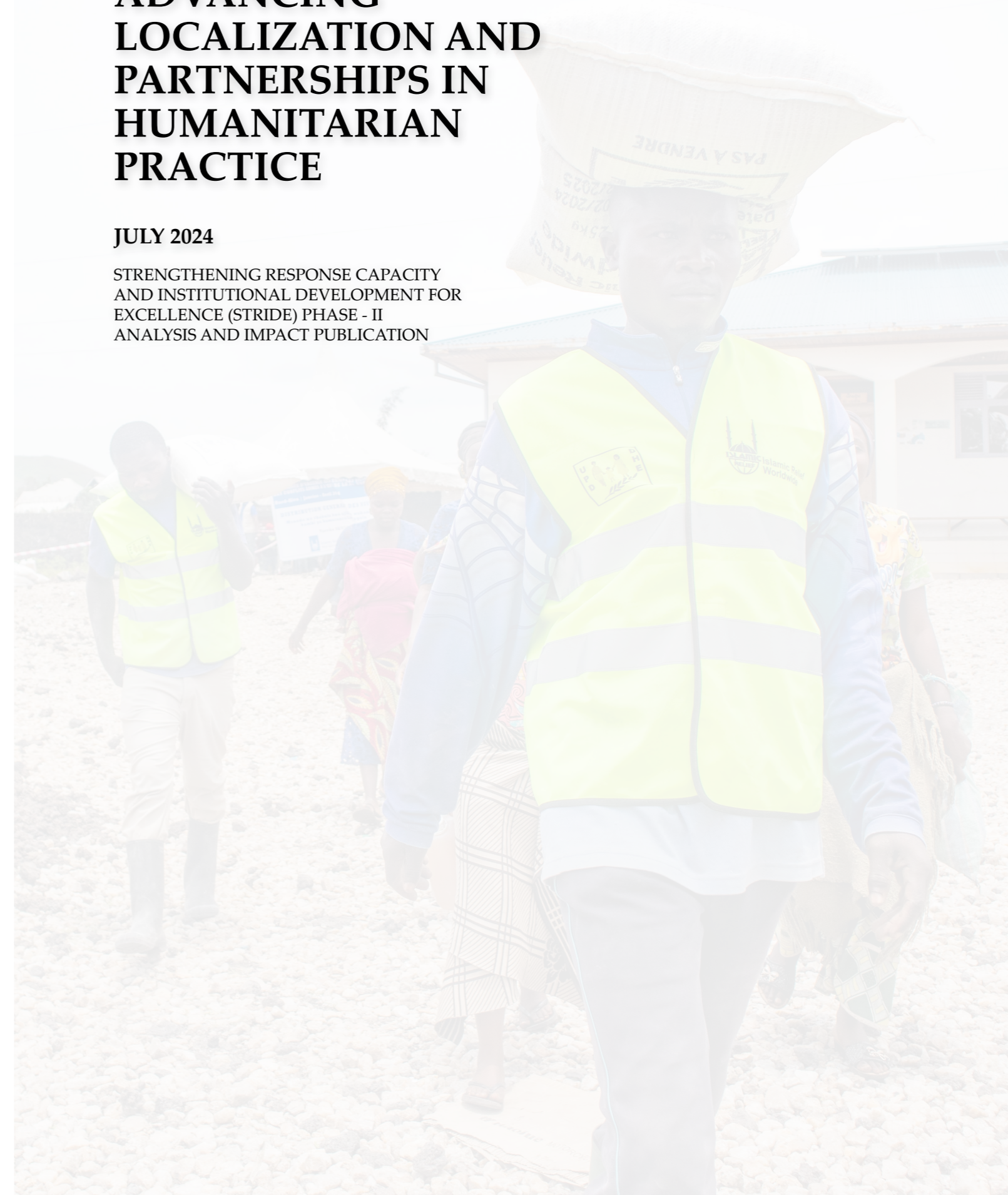


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JULY 2024

STRENGTHENING RESPONSE CAPACITY  
AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR  
EXCELLENCE (STRIDE) PHASE - II  
ANALYSIS AND IMPACT PUBLICATION



## Evaluation Timeline

This review was undertaken between 04 April 2024, and 24 May 2024. Islamic Relief Worldwide and EdWorX Consulting established this timeframe prior to project commencement.

## Acknowledgements

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Cover photo description: Islamic Relief's local partner UPDDHE leading life-saving emergency response for IPDs in DRC, 2023. Photo by Erasme-Eraste Serum, Union pour la Promotion/Protection, la Défense des Droits Humains et de l'Environnement-UPDDHE/GL

Design and layout by Muhammad Qasim Ali, Islamic Relief Worldwide

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

| Acronyms   | Definition  |
|------------|---|
| ADH        | Aktion Deutschland Hilft  |
| C4C        | Charter for Change  |
| CSA        | Capacity Self Assessment  |
| DAP        | Data Analysis Plan  |
| DRC        | Democratic Republic of Congo  |
| DQA        | Data Quality Assurance  |
| FGD        | Focus Group Discussion  |
| FSP        | Financial Sustainability Programme  |
| GB         | Grand Bargain   |
| GLP        | Global Learning Platform  |
| HNPW       | Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week   |
| INGO       | International Non-Government Organization   |
| IR         | Islamic Relief  |
| IRW        | Islamic Relief Worldwide  |
| KII        | Key Informant Interviews  |
| LDP        | Leadership Development Program  |
| LNGO       | Local Non-Government Organization   |
| LTF        | Localisation Taskforce  |
| MAXQDA     | MAX Qualitative Data Analysis   |
| MENA       | Middle East and North Africa  |
| NGO        | Non Governmental Organisation   |
| OECD (DAC) | Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (Development Assistance Committee) |
| QA         | Quality Assurance   |
| SPSS       | Statistical Package for Social Science  |
| STRIDE     | Strengthening Response Capacity and Institutional Development for Excellence              |
| TA         | Thematic Area   |
| TDSP       | Tekdeysovanphum   |
| VfM        | Value for Money   |



## Executive Summary

EdWorX Consulting reviewed Islamic Relief Worldwide's (IRW) STRIDE-II program to assess its effectiveness in promoting local partnerships and capacity strengthening for disaster preparedness. EdWorX Consulting used a mixed methods approach, including interviews, focus groups, and document reviews, to gather feedback from IRW, IR Country Offices, IR Family members, local partners, and donors.

### Findings

- STRIDE-II successfully built upon the recommendations of STRIDE-I<sup>1</sup>, particularly in areas of capacity strengthening and partnership development.
- The program aligns well with the commitments of the Charter for Change (C4C) and the Grand Bargain (GB)<sup>2</sup> by promoting localization and equitable partnerships. Key findings include increased direct funding for local partners, specific training programs, and collaborative decision-making<sup>3</sup>.
- The review identified several key learnings and success factors, including the importance of localization, strong on-ground partnerships, appropriate stakeholder engagement, and continuous capacity building.
- Challenges were also identified, such as budget limitations, unstable work conditions, and communication issues.
- Despite these challenges, the program was deemed relevant, coherent, and efficient according to OECD-DAC criteria.

### Recommendations

This report recommends several actions to improve future iterations of STRIDE:

- Increase overall awareness of STRIDE achievements and strengthen partnerships by involving local organizations earlier in the program design.
- Extend the program timeframe and invest in broader capacity strengthening for local partners, including fundraising, technical skills, and project management skills.
- Implement long-term monitoring frameworks to track progress and improve partnerships.
- Help local partners secure additional funding and explore alternative funding sources to expand the program's reach.
- Establish STRIDE as a permanent IRW-wide practice, incorporate climate change adaptation strategies, and share learnings from STRIDE-II with future programs.

<sup>1</sup> Humanitarian Policy Group, 2019: [Localizing emergency preparedness and response through partnerships](#)

<sup>2</sup> Review the report, [Grand Bargain Self-Reporting Exercise 2022 - 2023](#)

<sup>3</sup> Inter Agency Standing Committee: [Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report 2023](#)





# REPORT SUMMARY

Advancing Localization and  
Partnerships in Humanitarian  
Practice





# Report Summary

## Background

Humanitarian organizations like IRW are working in increasingly complex situations across the world, dealing with challenges presented by climate change, forced migration, political instability, refugee crises, and pandemics. Building upon the achievements of STRIDE I, STRIDE II is supported by Islamic Relief USA and Islamic Relief Germany, with additional backing from Aktion Deutschland Hilft (ADH). STRIDE II extends the program’s global reach, encompassing programs and local actors of more than 20 countries across Asia, East Africa, West Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). STRIDE II introduces a more holistic approach to preparedness, emphasizing community resilience and long-term development, ensuring that communities are better equipped to handle emergencies and can recover more swiftly.

A significant emphasis of STRIDE II is on genuine, inclusive localization. By actively involving local actors and communities in decision-making processes and implementation, the initiative ensures culturally relevant and sustainable responses. This approach aligns with the commitments of the Grand Bargain and the principles outlined in the C4C, which advocate for more efficient, effective, and localized humanitarian aid. By doing so, STRIDE II establishes stronger partnerships between international organizations, local governments, and community-based organizations.

Through these strategies, STRIDE II aims to enhance Islamic Relief’s role as a relevant, value-adding partner within the humanitarian ecosystem. The initiative strives to improve coordination, increase capacity strengthening, and drive innovation in humanitarian responses. By adopting innovative practices and technologies, the program ensures not only effective aid but also sustainable development, contributing to the long-term prosperity and resilience of the communities it serves<sup>4</sup>.

IRW’s STRIDE-II program is a landmark model for improving disaster response capacity through localization and local partnerships. EdWorX Consulting was tasked with reviewing the STRIDE-II program, to provide IRW and its partners with actionable evidence and recommendations that can help improve its programming and impact. The objectives of this review are as follows:

- Assess the complementarity and effectiveness of implementing recommendations from the STRIDE-I Program.
- Review the contribution and relationship between STRIDE-II, C4C, and GB commitments.
- Capture learnings, success factors, and challenges in implementing STRIDE-II work-streams i.e. localization, local partnership, capacity strengthening of IRW country offices and local partners.
- Provide recommendation for future interventions and practices related to localization and local partnerships

<sup>4</sup> Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2023: [STRIDE Conceptual Framework 2023](#).

## Methodology

EdWorX Consulting conducted a thorough review of the STRIDE-II program using a combination of primary and secondary research methods.

### Primary Research

Using a mixed methods approach, data was gathered from diverse stakeholder groups, including those from IRW headquarters, family members, country offices, consultants, and local partners. EdWorX Consulting’s methodology included:

- Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Thirteen key individuals with STRIDE-II knowledge were contacted, of which 10 responded and were subsequently interviewed.
- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Eight discussions were planned and completed as part of the data collection process.
- Digital Survey: 132 individuals contacted and 72 completed the digital survey.

| Data Collection Method | Response Rate |
|------------------------|---------------|
| KII                    | 77%           |
| FGD                    | 100%          |
| Survey                 | 55%           |

### Secondary Research/Documents Review

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the various aspects of the STRIDE-II program, EdWorX Consulting’s team conducted a thorough review of 80 documents provided by the IRW team.



Asia-Pacific Regional Humanitarian Partnerships Week, Bangkok, 2023



## Findings

This report provides a comprehensive review of the STRIDE II project, primarily focused on the objectives outlined below.

**Objective 1: The STRIDE-I project concluded with a set of recommendations. EdWorX Consulting’s team assessed stakeholders’ recall of these recommendations, followed by establishing their complementary and effective implementation within STRIDE-II. Key findings are as follows:**

- **Adaptive Approach:** STRIDE-I’s flexible approach gave local organizations control over their capacity-strengthening. This created a sense of ownership and led to its continuation in STRIDE-II.
- **Capacity Strengthening:** STRIDE-II built on STRIDE-I’s foundation by incorporating coaching, improved structures, and preparedness planning, leading to a more sustainable and impactful approach.
- **Partnerships:** STRIDE-I facilitated collaboration between local organizations and IRW, leading to stronger partnerships in STRIDE-II. Building upon it as a recommendation, STRIDE-II placed further emphasis on enhanced coordination and knowledge sharing.
- **Partner Selection:** STRIDE-II focused on collaborating with smaller local organizations. Under STRIDE-II, the strategy shifted to partnering with medium to large organizations. This change was made to ensure that partners had the capacity to effectively receive and implement capacity strengthening plans.
- **Dual Capacity Strengthening:** STRIDE-I recommended a “dual approach” to strengthen both IRW and local partners’ capabilities in parallel, facilitating mutual learning and collaboration. While IRW staff benefited from the Global Learning Platform, Partnership Training Programs, and on-the-ground knowledge through collaboration with local partners, local partners, benefitted from capacity self-assessments exercises, Leadership Training Programs, C4C annual meetings, and participating in events such as the 2024 Annual Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Weeks (HNPW).

Overall, respondents who recalled recommendations from STRIDE-I expressed confidence in the complementarity and effectiveness of those recommendations for STRIDE-II.

**Objective 2: The STRIDE-II initiative played a crucial role in advancing the commitments outlined by the C4C and the GB, particularly in promoting localization and equitable partnerships with local actors. Certain key themes were identified from the findings, which are provided below:**

- **Direct Funding:** IRW aims to allocate 25% of aid directly to local partners, empowering them (localization) and allowing IRW to focus on support in other areas. It achieved 19% last year and is progressing well.
- **Capacity-Strengthening:** STRIDE-II program trains and guides local partners, ensuring more sustainable humanitarian responses and localization.

- **Equitable Partnerships:** IRW adheres to a collaborative approach, working with local organizations as equals. This supports a culture of shared decision-making and mutual respect for expertise, ultimately leading to strong collaboration and higher efficiencies.
- **Financial Sustainability:** STRIDE-II helps local partners develop financial management skills and plans for self-sufficiency.
- **Internal Adaptation:** IRW formed internal groups to improve collaboration with local partners and simplify procedures for better partnership. The digital survey conducted by EdWorX Consulting revealed that over 90% of respondents expressed agreement with the notion that STRIDE-II has been instrumental in achieving the objectives of both C4C and GB.

**Objective 3: Several key learnings, success factors, and challenges emerged concerning the implementation of STRIDE-II workstreams.**

- **Lessons Learned:**
  - » Localization is key for effective and sustainable humanitarian response. Local actors offer valuable insights and context-specific approaches.
  - » Strong partnerships with local entities are crucial. Transparency, shared decision-making, and mutual respect build trust and empower communities.
  - » Comprehensive stakeholder engagement is vital. Including diverse perspectives (HQ, country offices, local partners, etc.) ensures strategies fit local contexts.
  - » Continuous capacity-strengthening is essential. Training equips local partners and staff with skills for successful implementation and program improvements.
  - » Adaptability and flexibility are necessary. Responsive adjustments to local political, economic, and social challenges ensured progress.
  - » The knowledge sharing platform in the STRIDE-II helped improve collaboration, innovation, and project outcomes by enabling participants to share best practices, as possible.
- **Success Factors:**
  - » Active involvement from Project Board provided direction and aligned efforts with organizational goals.
  - » Collaboration with local organizations enhanced knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and program impact.
  - » Targeted training for staff and partners improved skills, knowledge, and overall organizational performance.
  - » Thorough assessments ensured that interventions under STRIDE-II were tailored to the specific needs of institutions, such as IR country offices, headquarters, and local organizations. This approach focused on capacitating local partners, thereby address-



- ing the needs of communities and individuals in focus countries indirectly.
- » Involving various stakeholders (communities, staff, partners) led to more holistic and sustainable implementation.
- » Regular updates and transparent communication facilitated smooth implementation.
- » Robust M&E systems ensured accountability, tracked progress, and effective decisions.
- **Challenges:**
  - » In several cases, budget limitations, late funds transfer due to banking challenges, and inflation affected project timelines and activities.
  - » Political instability, regulations, and bureaucratic hurdles required urgent adaptation.
  - » The language, technical, and financial limitations of local partners hindered program delivery.
  - » Frequent staff changes disrupted continuity and knowledge retention.
  - » In a few cases, misunderstandings and delays arose due to communication issues between headquarters, country offices, and partners.
  - » Conflicts and access restrictions hampered project implementation in certain areas.

**Objective 4: Following are key recommendations resulting from the STRIDE-II review:**

- **Strengthen Visibility & Localization:** Increase awareness of STRIDE achievements, strengthen partnerships with local organizations by involving them at design stage, and further address challenges faced by local organizations during the due diligence process.
- **Enhance Project Management and Sustainability:** Extend STRIDE timeframe in general for better execution, invest in capacity-strengthening for local partners in other areas like fundraising, technical skills, project management, and develop a clear transition plan ensuring enhanced post-STRIDE sustainability for the local partner.
- **Improve Monitoring and Evaluation:** Implement long-term monitoring frameworks to track progress on disaster preparedness and management in post-STRIDE scenarios and to further improve partnerships.
- **Funding Strategies:** Increase STRIDE funding, explore alternative funding sources, and improve budget allocation for wider coverage.
- **Additional Considerations:** Establish STRIDE as a permanent and IRW-wide practice, incorporate climate adaptation strategies, facilitate knowledge sharing among local partners, and embed lessons learned from STRIDE-II into future programs.





# RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Advancing Localization and  
Partnerships in Humanitarian  
Practice





## Background

The humanitarian landscape continuously evolves, marked by emerging global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, food and financial crises, and political instability. In response to these complex and unfavorable environments, humanitarian and development organizations face increasing pressure to adapt and strengthen their response capacity. Islamic Relief, a leading humanitarian organization has been at the forefront of addressing these challenges through initiatives like the Strengthening Response Capacity and Institutional Development for Excellence (STRIDE) program<sup>5</sup>.

STRIDE represents a groundbreaking model of institutional capacity enhancement for disaster preparedness and local partnerships. Building upon the successes of STRIDE I, STRIDE-II has expanded its reach to more than 20 countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. With a focus on localization and partnership management, STRIDE-II aims to empower local actors and enhance IRW's capacity to respond effectively to humanitarian crises.

Following are key initiatives established under STRIDE-II:

- Empowering local partners through Capacity Self-Assessment (CSA) enhances their ability to respond to disasters and promotes sustainable development. The CSA assesses strengths and weaknesses to create plans for improvement.
- Leadership and Management Development Programmes focused on delivering training to senior executives in IR and local organizations. These programs emphasized how organizations can achieve sustainable success through the development of strategic leadership skills.
- Local partners were exposed to Financial Sustainability Training to improve financial management skills and long-term sustainability.
- Partnership Management training program equipped IR staff with the skills to collaborate effectively with partner organizations. The program focused on key areas like partner selection, project implementation, and relationship management.
- Global Learning Platform (GLP) is an initiative launched in 2021 to facilitate cross-learning between IR COs by capturing and sharing best practices through a series of virtual sessions and physical workshops. Through this platform, IR staff can connect, learn from each other, and share experiences, promoting a culture of continuous learning and improvement, ultimately enhancing the support provided to the local partners.
- To achieve IRW's commitment to C4C and GB, the project board and senior leadership established a Localization Task Force (LTF) consisting of members from IRW, country offices, and IR family member offices. The LTF was carefully formed, ensuring members have diverse backgrounds in organizational governance, finance and compliance, operational management, partnerships, and relationship management etc. The LTF is an initiative under the GLP to lead localisation discourse within IRW, which after 4 virtual meetings and a week-long extensive workshop significantly developed an actionable localisation roadmap where LTF members discussed decisions and concrete next steps on the future of localisation for Islamic Relief.

<sup>5</sup> Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2023: [STRIDE\) Conceptual Framework, 2023](#)

- Research and learning were critical for devising future actions and highlighting the value of local expertise. A study<sup>6</sup> was conducted to understand how “Localization of Humanitarian Action” is interpreted within the organization, involving various levels of leadership. This research set the tone for STRIDE and identified the key step the organization needed to take towards achieving a strong commitment to localization efforts. Another extensive research<sup>7</sup> conducted in partnership with Humanitarian Advisory Group and GLOW Consultants on “Bridging Localization and Climate Adaptation Pathways” explored how leveraging the complementarity of localization and locally led climate adaptation can bring about positive change for local communities. This research identified the critical need for intentional incorporation of climate action into IR's localisation workstreams. Another critical report<sup>8</sup> by IR in partnership with Samuel Hall highlights the “Added Value of Faith Actors in Localization”. This study comprehensively highlights the challenges and benefits of involving faith actors in the localisation of aid and practice. Faith Actors bring strengths like access to faith-based donors and strong community ties, which can increase funding, trust, and participation in aid and development programs.
- Active participation in C4C and GB working groups, along with timely reporting on the commitments, ensured IR's commitment to localization, and fostered continuous learning and collaboration with like-minded civil society actors. In 2023, the STRIDE team co-led a couple of sessions at the C4C Annual meeting where STRIDE team invited research partners and local partners to contribute local knowledge and experiences. One of these sessions was on “Financing Modalities for Locally Led Adaptation”, where our local partner in Nigeria, IDS contributed their local experiences and talked about social enterprises as a means for local organizations to diversify funding and achieve sustainability as a means of true localization. IR also ensured timely submission on the localization progress of IR in annual C4C and GB reports.

Through these initiatives, and many more, STRIDE-II was poised to drive transformative change, recognizing that true development can only be achieved by empowering those on the frontlines.

Overall, under STRIDE, IRW has expanded its reach to new countries, including Cambodia, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), to assist more people in need. IRW partners with local organizations to ensure their interventions are suitable and sustainable. This expansion reflects IRW's commitment to helping more vulnerable populations and addressing growing disaster management needs caused by climate change and conflicts.

EdWorX Consulting was engaged by IRW to complete an independent review study of the STRIDE-II program. The review aims to assess the complementarity and effectiveness of incorporating recommendations from the STRIDE I, analyze the relationship between STRIDE-II and key initiatives such as the C4C and GB, and identify learnings, success factors, and challenges in implementing the project's workstreams.

<sup>6</sup> Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2020: Internal study on ‘Exploratory research on localization action in Islamic Relief’

<sup>7</sup> Humanitarian Advisory Group & Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2023: [Bridging localisation and climate adaptation pathways: case studies from Asia, the Middle East and Africa](#)

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Hall & Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2024: [Faith actors value addition in localization, opportunities and barriers in humanitarian architecture](#)





Photo Credits: Nigerian Red Cross Society

# METHODOLOGY

Advancing Localization and Partnerships in Humanitarian Practice



# Methodology

EdWorX Consulting’s evaluation of the STRIDE-II employed a comprehensive methodology combining primary and secondary research.

## Primary Research

**Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** Key Informant Interviews were conducted as in-depth qualitative surveys with individuals possessing significant knowledge and experience related to the STRIDE-II. From a pool of thirteen interview candidates, ten responded and were subsequently interviewed.

**Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Eight FGDs were conducted to gather diverse perspectives through guided group conversations. Carefully selected groups discussed specific topics related to STRIDE-II under the guidance of a trained moderator. The semi-structured format with open-ended questions facilitated rich discussions, allowing participants to build on each other’s ideas. The design and feasibility of the FGDs were based on the list of potential respondents provided by IRW. The table below provides a breakdown of sampling by stakeholder groups:

Table 1: KII and FGD Sampling by Stakeholder Groups

| Stakeholder Groups | KIIs | FGDs |
|--------------------|------|------|
| IRW HQ             | 3    | 1    |
| IRW Family Member  | -    | 1    |
| IR Country Office  | 4    | 3    |
| Local Partner      | 3    | 3    |
| Total              | 10   | 8    |

**Digital Quantitative Survey:** A digital survey was conducted to collect data from a larger audience. Conducted via EdWorX Consulting’s secure account on the Survey Monkey platform, the survey allowed for broad geographic participation from different stakeholder groups. As per the list provided by IRW, 132 potential respondents were contacted with 72 complete responses.

Table 2: Digital Survey Sampling by Stakeholder Groups

| Stakeholder Groups | Responses (%) | Number of Responses |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| IRW HQ             | 16.7          | 12                  |
| IR Family Member   | 9.7           | 7                   |
| IR Country Office  | 30.6          | 22                  |
| Consultant         | 5.6           | 4                   |
| Local Partner      | 33.3          | 24                  |
| Other*             | 4.1           | 3                   |
| Total              | 100           | 72                  |

\*Includes IRW representative from Communication and Finance team and an Independent Consultant

## Secondary Research

**Document Review:** Eighty documents provided by the IRW team underwent a thorough review to extract and analyze information relevant to various aspects of the STRIDE-II program. This analysis served to support the overall evaluation process.

## Data Collection Tools

**Questionnaire for KIIs:** A semi-structured questionnaire was developed for KIIs to ensure organized and efficient data collection. Tailored for different stakeholders, including IRW team members and local partners, the questionnaire was reviewed and approved by IRW before the interviews began.

**Discussion Guidelines for FGDs:** A discussion guide was developed and used for FGDs to ensure structured and focused conversations. These discussion guides were also reviewed and approved by IRW prior to the commencement of data collection.

The FGDs and KIIs were conducted via Zoom and the resulting recordings and transcripts were used to validate team notes as well as ensure robust and triangulated data analysis.

**Questionnaire for Digital Surveys:** A structured questionnaire was developed for the digital survey, hosted on EdWorX Consulting’s secure Survey Monkey account. Participants received direct links from the survey platform and follow up requests via direct email. All responses were collected and securely held on the Survey Monkey site.

**Document Review Matrix:** The document review process was guided by EdWorX Consulting’s effective Document Review Matrix, ensuring information was collected and summarized in a clear and structured manner. This matrix facilitated efficient data retrieval and analysis during the reporting stage.

## Ethical Considerations

**Informed Consent and Recording:** All KIIs and FGDs were video recorded to capture the rich discussions accurately. Participants were informed about the purpose of the recordings and their use. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of their right to retract consent at any time. Participation was voluntary, and participants were encouraged to ask clarifying questions about the process.

**Confidentiality:** All reporting was done in aggregate and anonymized to protect participants’ identities as needed. Recordings were securely stored and accessible only to the relevant research team. These recordings will be retained for three months post-project completion, and then deleted following EdWorX Consulting’s data protection regulations.

## Data Analysis

**Qualitative Data Analysis:** Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques with MAXQDA. This involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme identification, review and reporting.



**Secondary Data Analysis:** The document review identified key findings related to the project's objectives in alignment with themes identified above. This analysis helped corroborate external views with those of the IRW team, ensuring an unbiased and triangulated perspective.

**OECD-DAC Criteria:** The evaluation incorporated OECD-DAC criteria (relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability) to provide a grounded understanding of the program's performance.

**Charter for Change and Grand Bargain Analysis:** The analysis included document reviews and interviews to assess STRIDE-II's alignment with the C4C and the GB principles.

### Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms

**Planning and Update Meetings:** Regular check-in meetings ensured synergy with the IRW team. And regular team meetings kept the project on track.

**Review of Objectives and Outcomes:** EdWorX Consulting measured deliverables and outcomes against the objectives outlined by the IRW team, ensuring all objectives were met.

**Internal Validation:** At least three EdWorX Consulting team members proofread and edited all content before sharing it with the IRW team for feedback and finalization. This process ensured high-quality, timely, and value-for-money deliverables.

**Quality Assurance of Deliverables:** Each deliverable underwent internal review by the Project Manager and Lead Consultant, followed by vetting by EdWorX Consulting's internal Quality Assurance Officer to ensure alignment with tender requirements and timely delivery.







# SURVEY FINDINGS

This report provides a comprehensive review of the STRIDE-II, focusing primarily on the following objectives.

**Objective 1: Complementarity and Effectiveness of Implementing Recommendations from STRIDE-I**

**Objective 2: Review The Contribution and Relationship Between STRIDE-II, Charter For Change (C4C), And Grand Bargain (GB) Commitments**

**Objective 3: Capture Learnings, Success Factors, And Challenges In Implementing STRIDE-II Workstreams i.e. Localization, Local Partnership, Capacity Strengthening of IRW Country Offices And Local Partners**

**Objective 4: Recommendations**



## OBJECTIVE 1: COMPLEMENTARITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF IMPLEMENTING RECOMMENDATIONS FROM STRIDE-I

Initiated in 2016, STRIDE-I was a 33-month project with an overall objective to ‘Improve efficiency and effectiveness of Islamic Relief’s humanitarian response’ in the Asia region. The project was led by Islamic Relief staff at the regional level in Asia and humanitarian focal points from the countries in which the project took place. The overall aim of STRIDE was to improve the capacity of selected Islamic Relief Country Offices and Local Non-Governmental Organizations (LNGOs).

The STRIDE-I project concluded with a set of recommendations<sup>9</sup>. The EdWorX Consulting team assessed stakeholders’ recall of these recommendations followed by establishing their complementary and effective implementation within STRIDE-II. The following summarizes the findings:

### Flexibility, Adaptability and Customization

A review of relevant documents and qualitative research established the vital role of flexibility and adaptability in IRW’s strategy to enhance the capacity of local organizations. This necessitates a tailored approach that considers both the size and unique characteristics of each local partner.

The STRIDE-I framework adopted a flexible approach that leveraged capacity self-assessment by local partners. This approach employed a tool with pre-defined indicators to identify and prioritize capacity gaps. By empowering local organizations to determine the prioritization and approach for addressing these gaps, the STRIDE-I framework ultimately established local partner’s ownership. The positive results of this approach led to its recommendation and continued use, potentially with even greater emphasis, during STRIDE-II. This approach was also praised by IRW staff who described it as “extremely partner-centric” because it prioritized collaboration and local ownership.



*A due diligence process is conducted before a partner is taken on board. Capacity Self-Assessment (CSA) of local partners is done to ensure that the gaps are identified by the local partner itself, and IRW training will be designed and customized to address these gaps. This foundation was laid done in STRIDE-I and STRIDE-II ensured continuation of the same. (KII IRW)*

IRW staff continued providing customized suggestions for policies and procedures to local organizations which had the final say in what they implemented. This focus on local ownership extended to other resources as well. For example, different training courses were conducted by local trainers who had a deep understanding of the specific context the local organizations operated in.

<sup>9</sup> Humanitarian Policy Group, 2019: [Localizing emergency preparedness and response through partnerships](#)

### Approach to Capacity Strengthening

This was a key recommendation from STRIDE-I, that STRIDE-II continue the practice of capacity self-assessments led by local partners, and to focus on providing training on the self-identified gaps. For IR partners, these gaps were mainly around Leadership and Financial Sustainability. IRW partners participated in the Leadership Development Programs (LDPs) which focused on developing key leadership competencies such as communication, decision making, problem solving and strategic thinking. Successful LDPs aimed to help leaders become more effective, encouraging local organizations to have relevant policies to achieve organizational goals. An example of note is a local Cambodian non-profit, Tekdeysovanphum (TDSP) directly translating as “Golden Village”, for which they hired a Cambodia-based Technical Consultant to work on their organizational plans and policies, strategic plan, Standard Operating Procedures and Safeguarding Policy.



Leadership Development Program, Cambodia, 2023

Further, Financial Sustainability Programs (FSPs) were rolled out to local partners. It is imperative to note that Financial Sustainability Programs are essential for local partners as they provide the necessary tools and resources to ensure the long-term financial sustainability and viability of their organizations. These programs aim to strengthen financial management practices, improve fundraising strategies, and enhance revenue diversification efforts. By participating in these programs, local partners can build capacity, increase their financial sustainability, and ultimately better serve their communities and achieve their mission. In line with this, NRD is implementing the financial accounting system, QuickBooks, and has recruited a consultant to develop business and resource mobilization plans and cash transfer programming. This ensures the organization’s continued success and contributes to the development and stability of the local community. This demonstrates IRW’s support to local organizations in improving their ability to respond to humanitarian crises. This was further affirmed by an FGD participant (Local Partner) who stated:



*Capacity strengthening must not only be capacity-strengthening, but it must also include continuous coaching and mentoring for effectiveness and efficiency of the organization.*



Local organizations continued to undergo a thorough review of their internal systems, including policies, systems, and procedures. A Local Partner from another FGD commented:

*The STRIDE-I project has brought the necessary capacity-strengthening to our organization, and STRIDE-II has reinforced the successful implementation of the theory learned from STRIDE-I. That's why I'm proud and satisfied to say that the STRIDE-I and STRIDE-II projects have made a valid contribution to successfully raising the level of management, leadership, know-how/savoir-faire, improving the quality and accountability of service to all stakeholders, and above all opening opportunities for us.*



Sustainable Finance Program, Nigeria, 2023

### Partnerships and Relationships

STRIDE-I's continued focus on flexibility facilitated the development of collaborative partnerships with IRW and other local organizations. These partnerships extended beyond countries where IRW had previously established its presence. Most local partners indicated that most of them never had any previous relationship with IRW or other local organizations and yet, through the project, strong partnerships with trust were established.

STRIDE-I highlighted the importance of establishing strong partnerships with local actors, LN-GOs, UN agencies and other humanitarian actors. It was envisaged that these partnerships could facilitate coordination, pooling of resources and exchange of expertise, which was successfully applied in STRIDE-II. As one of the FGD participants stated:

*Let me start by being grateful, in fact I am so grateful with IRW and its STRIDE initiatives which were beneficial to us as local organizations. Now we can respond to our own crises without running to international organizations and now we have capacity to mobilize resources from other local partners, on our own.*

Another participant stated:

*Because of the STRIDE project, we can now respond to crisis situations by ourselves, depending on our contingency plan and the preparation initiatives taken by our organization. And STRIDE helped us in establishing a coordination mechanism. We have now people who are assigned to different clusters. They participate in humanitarian response cluster and then share information with other stakeholders about what is happening in our context.*

### Partner Selection

In STRIDE-I, the focus was on collaborating with smaller local organizations. Under STRIDE-II, the strategy shifted to partnering with medium to large organizations. This change was made to ensure that partners had the capacity to effectively receive and implement capacity strengthening plans.

This approach was termed unique and challenging yet prioritized in strengthening the capacity of local actors who are often the first responders in a crisis. As one IR Country Office FGD participant highlighted:

*Some of the local partners were not even registered, so we needed to first help them have legal documents before onboarding, which was difficult. Also, some of the countries were just difficult for example Nigeria, and due to conflicts and different contexts and you are not based there as an IR representative, it was just difficult. Onboarding local partners was not easy.*

Additionally, this was challenging for IRW, especially considering their strict due diligence and



screening process with organizations that did not have the relevant strategies, plans and policies in place. The selection process helped IRW understand how to maneuver and respond to different contexts.

Furthermore, the selection and the due diligence process itself proved valuable. It allowed IRW to develop a nuanced understanding of how to maintain their high standards while appreciating the diverse approaches of local organizations. This adaptability ultimately facilitated capacity enhancement at local partners level and development of strong collaborative partnerships.



*The STRIDE-I was well implemented as the planned activities were achieved for the satisfaction of all beneficiaries. The IRW support and follow-up mechanism after STRIDE-I was very well and contributed a lot to enhance our capacity as an organization to conduct more successful activities (Local Partner).*

### Dual Capacity Strengthening

Another recommendation from document review referred to adopting a dual capacity strengthening approach. This means improving the capabilities of IRW and local partners at the same time. This approach offers several advantages including reduction of power imbalance that often exists between these organizations and by learning from each other, ultimately leading to increased confidence in collaborative efforts.

The STRIDE program implemented a range of activities designed to address the needs of both IR staff and their local partners. IR staff benefited from the Global Learning Platform, Partnership Training Programs, and most importantly, by gaining on-the-ground, practical knowledge through collaboration with local partners on tailored projects and joint research. Local partners, in turn, benefitted from, inter alia, capacity self-assessments exercises, Leadership Training Programs, recognition at C4C annual meetings, and participation in events such as the 2024 Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Weeks (HNPW). These comprehensive achievements demonstrate the program's commitment to dual capacity strengthening throughout the STRIDE-II initiative.

In conclusion, the strategy to strengthen local organizations emphasizes flexibility and local ownership. Through a capacity self-assessment tool, local partners identify their own needs and IR tailors the support accordingly. This includes training programs on leadership and financial management, along with customized suggestions for policies and procedures. Partnerships are a key focus, with IR working with both established and new local organizations to build trust and share expertise. While challenges exist, like onboarding partners and adapting to diverse contexts, IR's adaptable approach establishes strong partnerships and strengthens the capacity of both IR and local organizations.

The analysis of stakeholders' feedback and review of project documentation jointly confirms the implementation of the recommendations outlined in STRIDE-I. This successful implementation further validates the complementary nature and effectiveness of these recommendations.



Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week, Switzerland, 2024



Global Learning Platform Meeting, Nepal, 2023



## OBJECTIVE 2: REVIEW THE CONTRIBUTION AND RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRIDE-II, CHARTER FOR CHANGE (C4C), AND GRAND BARGAIN (GB) COMMITMENTS

Initiated in 2016, STRIDE-I was a 33-month project with an overall objective to ‘Improve efficiency and effectiveness of Islamic Relief’s humanitarian response’ in the Asia region. The project was led by Islamic Relief staff at the regional level in Asia and humanitarian focal points from the countries in which the project took place. The overall aim of STRIDE was to improve the capacity of selected Islamic Relief Country Offices and Local Non-Governmental Organizations (LNGOs).

In addition, from the literature document review and progress reports, STRIDE-II demonstrated alignment with the principles and objectives of the C4C and the GB. The respondents identified certain key themes, which are provided below.

### Direct Funding to Local Partners

IRW is aligned with allocating 25% of its humanitarian funding directly to local partners. While the organization achieved 19% last year, it is important to note that this figure excludes funding for development programs or seasonal initiatives. This represents significant progress for an organization with a history of direct implementation. The Nigeria Floods 2022 response exemplifies successful localization by IRW. Despite no local presence, IRW effectively coordinated with local actors, sought their guidance, engaged in joint proposal development, and supported their disaster response efforts. IRW was able to support the Nigerian Red Cross Society (NRCS) provide relief and assistance to the flood-affected populations in two of the worst-hit Nigerian states where IRW funding made its way to LGAs of Shiroro in Niger State and Ogbaru in Anambra State, as well as Akili Ogidi and Obeagwe in Anambra State, in the form of Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) to vulnerable communities.

*As an organization, we made a commitment. I mean, I think if you look at the commitment to ensuring that 25% of your funding goes directly to local actors. I mean, a lot of governments have made this commitment. But if you look at the reality, not everybody has hit that target yet. (KII IRW)*

The implications for local partners are also far reaching. For instance, in Nepal, a project funded by Sweden was directly channeled to a local partner rather than through intermediaries like Islamic Relief Nepal, indicating a shift towards direct local empowerment. Similarly, in Bangladesh, a project funded by the Swedish donor organization Forum Civ (formerly Forum Syd) also ensured direct funding to local partners, while IRW supported them in technical aspects like Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL).

*Yes, there is one commitment that at least 25% of the funding should go directly to the local partner. I think this is one of those commitments in Nepal now, we are already implementing; one project which has been directly funded to the partner. (KII IRW)*

### Capacity Strengthening Initiatives<sup>10</sup>

Capacity-strengthening is a cornerstone of both the GB and C4C commitments. IRW places a significant focus on building the capacity of local partners through training and guidance. Analysis of IRW’s annual report revealed significant progress in Grand Bargain 2.0 implementation. STRIDE II, with a budget of \$1.8 million, granted \$28,000 per new partner for capacity enhancement. IRW localized partnership guidelines through country office grants, involving local experts and actors. In 2022, about 53 local organizations across 7 countries received capacity-building support. Capacity strengthening grants were allocated for IR country offices to develop context-specific partnerships management guidelines based on scoping studies. The approach encouraged engaging local experts with technical and contextual expertise. Through quality funding and training, IRW strengthened both country offices and local partners, demonstrating commitment to localization and sustainable partnerships.

IRW distributed grants to 20 Country Offices and 6 partners in 3 non-present countries. This funding addressed self-identified needs and supported the development of partnership guidelines. The initiative aimed to strengthen local capacities and expand IRW’s reach and effectiveness in humanitarian and development work. For instance, in Iraq, a small grant project significantly contributed to local capacity-strengthening by mapping the needs of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and providing targeted training sessions. This initiative, coordinated with the Directorate of National NGOs (DNGO), highlighted the importance of local actors in the humanitarian transition phase, emphasizing the need for ongoing investment in local capacity to ensure sustainable humanitarian responses.

*The grant, though modest at \$10,000 to \$15,000 USD, had a substantial impact. With this funding, we conducted a comprehensive mapping of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Iraq. This process was carried out in close collaboration with the DNGO, the national government agency responsible for overseeing NGOs. Our mapping exercise identified the specific capacity needs of these CSOs. Based on these findings, we organized several events, including capacity-strengthening training sessions tailored to address the identified needs. While the grant primarily funded these training events, it had a broader effect. It served as a catalyst, motivating the DNGO to take a more active role in supporting and developing the CSO sector in Iraq. (KII Local Partner)*

<sup>10</sup> International Agency Standing Committee, 2023: [Grand Bargain in 2022: Annual Self Report – Narrative Summary](#), Islamic Relief Worldwide



### Equitable Partnerships and Visibility

IRW's focus on "equitable partnerships" goes beyond just funding. It creates a balanced relationship with local partners. Imagine working together, where IRW is not dictating the plan. Instead, both sides have a say in how things are done ensuring shared decision-making. Respect for each other's expertise is key, along with open and transparent communication that ensures lesser reporting burdens for the local partners while creating trust and a true partnership. A review of progress reports from two Cambodian local organizations highlights IRW's Capacity Self-Assessment exercise as a notable demonstration of its dedication to establish local ownership. This methodology enables local partners to independently evaluate their strengths and pinpoint areas needing enhancement, rather than relying on external assessments. The implementation of this approach strengthens IRW's commitment to empowering local entities and promoting sustainable development practices among its local partners.

An analysis of progress reports revealed that in 2022, severe flooding devastated parts of Nigeria. IRW's funding enabled the NRCS to deliver aid to vulnerable communities in flood affected regions. The support was identified through local partner's engagement in the humanitarian response proposal, and funds were primarily distributed as CVA, allowing affected populations to meet their immediate needs efficiently.



*They've identified NRCS and want NRCS to implement activities independently. Yes, without active engagement. I understand this basically local actors taking charge. STRIDE-II focused on helping organizations identify gaps and helped in filling them following the agenda of localization. (KII IRW)*

Furthermore, to promote visibility, IRW acted proactively ensuring local partners were recognized in joint activities. In May 2024, in Geneva, research partners; Humanitarian Advisory Group, Glow Consultants, Samuel Hall, and local Nigerian partner, Intercommunity Development Social Organization (IDS), were given an international platform, HNPW, to represent themselves, enhancing their visibility and credibility in the international humanitarian community.



Emergency Flood Response, Cash Voucher Assistance, Nigeria, 2022



Sustainable Finance Program, DRC, 2023

### Financial Sustainability

Financial sustainability is another key principle emphasized by the C4C and GB. STRIDE-II was highlighted as a prominent initiative supporting this commitment. This program addresses financial sustainability in two ways: firstly, by providing local partners with financial management training to ensure the proper use of funds and eliminate inefficiencies within their systems. Secondly, STRIDE-II equips local organizations with the knowledge and tools needed to develop further strategies for self-sufficiency. One example of this is the increasing number of NGOs transitioning to social enterprises. Social enterprises engage in commercial activities that prioritize community well-being. While their profits may be marginal, these earnings serve a dual purpose: sustaining the core operations of the organization and generating funds to directly support their humanitarian work.



*I was in one of those training, and I found that 3 out of 7 partners trained on financial sustainability training, are now thinking to become social enterprise so they can earn their own profit. So, they will sustain in both as profit and non-profit. I connected those local partners to our internal micro-finance team. Achieving financial sustainability is extremely important. (KII IRW)*

### Internal Adaptations

IRW's commitment to localization was also evident in its internal adaptations. For example, the setup of Localization Task Force and Global Learning Platform to review and adapt its internal processes to better support smoother collaboration with local partners. This included creating working groups to streamline processes and ensure they are fit for purpose in a context where more work is done through local partners.



Overall, STRIDE-II significantly contributed to advancing the goals of the C4C and GB. The program is also viewed as a valuable model for other organizations working towards achieving the C4C and GB objectives. A short quantitative survey conducted by EdWorX Consulting across both internal and external stakeholders indicated that over 90% of respondents expressed agreement with the point that STRIDE-II contributes to the fulfillment of C4C and GB commitments.

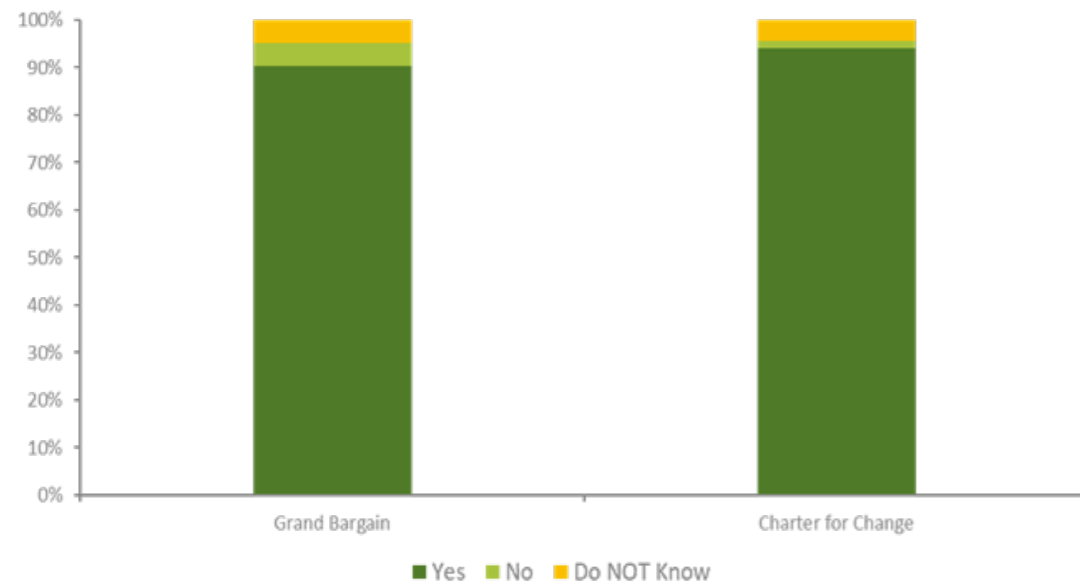


Figure 1: STRIDE-II contribution to C4C and GB; Source: Digital survey evaluation



Localization Taskforce Meeting, Turkiye, 2022

### OBJECTIVE 3: CAPTURE LEARNINGS, SUCCESS FACTORS, AND CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING STRIDE-II WORKSTREAMS I.E. LOCALIZATION, LOCAL PARTNERSHIP, CAPACITY STRENGTHENING OF IRW COUNTRY OFFICES AND LOCAL PARTNERS

Through the KIIs, FGDs, and Document Review, several key learnings, success factors, and challenges emerged concerning the implementation of STRIDE-II workstreams.

#### Lessons Learned

An analysis of lessons learned from the successes and challenges faced by the STRIDE-II project revealed the following important themes:

##### Importance of Localization

Several respondents acknowledged the critical role of localization in humanitarian response, recognizing its potential to enhance effectiveness and sustainability by leveraging local knowledge, resources, and networks. Engaging with local actors provided valuable insights into community dynamics, cultural nuances, and contextual challenges, emphasizing the importance of context-specific approaches.

##### Empowerment through Local Partnerships

Workshops and collaborative initiatives underscored the significance of creating strong partnerships with local entities. Respondents learned that transparent communication, shared decision-making, and mutual respect are essential for building trust and commitment among stakeholders. Effective partnerships empower communities and contribute to long-term sustainability.

##### Comprehensive Stakeholder Engagement

Several respondents and document review emphasized the importance of engaging a broad spectrum of stakeholders in the effective implementation of STRIDE-II. This inclusive approach ensured that diverse perspectives were integrated, leading to strategies well-suited to local contexts and operational needs. By including directors, leaders, coordinators, and staff from headquarters, country offices, local partners, and consultants, IRW gained diverse perspectives that supported a deeper understanding of localization efforts. These engagements highlighted the necessity of empowering local actors and tailoring strategies to fit diverse contexts.



*The involvement of various stakeholders, from headquarters to local partners, established a holistic understanding and ensured that diverse perspectives were considered. This inclusive approach was essential for tailoring strategies to fit our operational context, especially in areas affected by conflict and displacement. (IRW)*





*Empowering local actors through inclusive engagement has been vital in tailoring strategies that fit our diverse operational contexts. (IRW)*

**Continuous Capacity Strengthening**

A key learning area identified was the continuous need for capacity-strengthening. Capacity-strengthening efforts targeted various areas such as project management, proposal writing, financial management, and organizational development. Training sessions equipped participants with practical skills, tools, and resources necessary for successful implementation and organizational growth. Strengthening capacities at both country offices and local partner organizations was identified as essential for achieving sustainable impact. Capacity strengthening related to localization and organizational commitments were crucial. These initiatives helped staff and partners enhance their skills and understanding, which improved the program’s effectiveness. Several respondents noted that these capacity-strengthening efforts were instrumental in enabling teams to navigate complex project demands and improve the quality of humanitarian interventions.



*Capacity-strengthening initiatives have enabled us to better navigate complex project demands and enhance the quality of our interventions. For instance, staff in Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Sudan now have a clearer understanding of the Grand Bargain commitments and how to implement them locally.*

**Adaptability and Flexibility**

Several respondents and document reviews highlighted the ability to adapt strategies to fit the local context as a significant learning. This adaptability was crucial in regions with unique political, economic, and social challenges. The ability to make responsive adjustments in program delivery ensured continued progress despite evolving circumstances. Flexibility enabled teams to effectively navigate complex environments and maintain momentum towards project objectives.



*Navigating the stringent regulatory requirements requires adaptive strategies and flexible approaches. Working with local partners who understand these regulations has been crucial for our project success. (IRW)*



*Understanding local contexts and adapting our strategies accordingly has been key. The insights from local partners have helped us tailor our approaches to better address the needs on the ground. (IRW)*

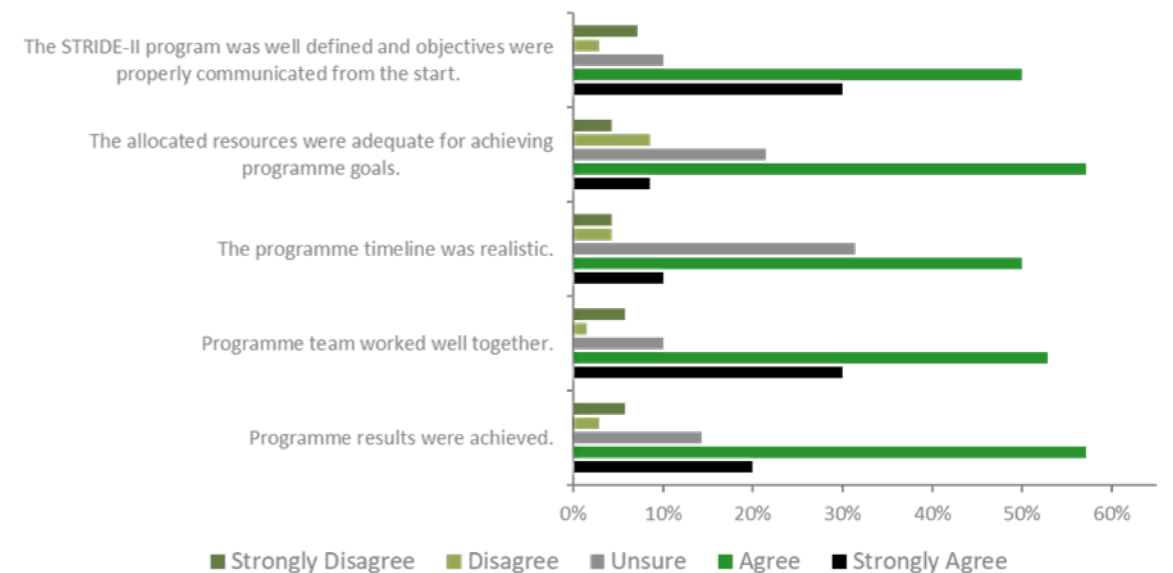
**Value of Knowledge Sharing**

Platforms for knowledge sharing, including workshops, forums, and peer learning networks, played a critical role in establishing collaboration and innovation among participants. By sharing best practices, lessons learned, and innovative approaches, these platforms promoted continuous improvement and adaptation, creating a culture of collaboration and enabling participants to leverage collective expertise for enhanced outcomes. The initiatives encompass the Global Learning Platform, Leadership Development Trainings, Partnership Trainings, and exposure to global networking platforms. A detailed explanation of their significance, purpose, and outcomes has already been discussed in this document.

These learnings highlight the transformative impact of STRIDE-II in enhancing participants’ understanding of localization, partnership development, and capacity-strengthening for sustainable humanitarian actions.

A digital survey distributed to all stakeholders yielded a positive response across various STRIDE-II parameters. Notably, the combined percentage of “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” responses for nearly all parameters approached 80%.

Analysis of the survey reveals a very low level of disagreement overall, typically less than 10% across all questions. The primary reasons for the disagreement stem from budgetary constraints, dissatisfaction with the program’s perceived limited scope, lack of internal communication regarding program information and updates, and a perception that STRIDE-II operates in isolation and lacks alignment with the overall IR organizational strategy. While the number of dissenting responses is statistically insignificant, it is still important to address these concerns to improve future iterations of the program.



**Figure 2:** STRIDE-II ratings by stakeholders; Source: Digital Survey evaluation



## Success Factors

Participants recognized several successes, such as localization, capacity enhancement, etc. Major success factors, as highlighted by the survey, are provided below:

### Strong Leadership Engagement

Several respondents indicated that engagement with IRW leadership was a critical success factor. This engagement helped the teams advance the localization agenda in an effective way.

— *The active involvement of our headquarters' leadership provided essential strategic direction and support, aligning our efforts with broader organizational goals. This top-down support has been crucial in driving the localization agenda. (IRW)*

— *Leadership engagement has created a sense of ownership and accountability across different levels of the organization. This has been particularly evident in our efforts to promote the training and practical implementation. (IRW)*



Country Directors Conference on IRW's new global strategy, Türkiye, 2023

### Strong Local Partnerships

Forming and sustaining strong partnerships with local organizations was highlighted as a key factor in the success of STRIDE-II. These collaborations enabled effective knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and significantly enhanced the programs' overall impact.

— *Working closely with local actors has enhanced knowledge exchange and resource sharing, significantly improving the impact of our programs. For instance, our collaboration with the Material Aid Commission has demonstrated the benefits of integrating local expertise in project delivery. (IRW)*

— *These partnerships have not only promoted sustainability but also strengthened our long-term relationships with local stakeholders. The capacity assessment and mapping of 24 local organizations have been instrumental in identifying and leveraging local strengths. (IRW)*

### Effective Capacity Strengthening

Targeted training and development programs for staff and local partners were essential in enhancing the effectiveness of STRIDE-II. These initiatives improved skills, knowledge, and the overall performance of humanitarian interventions.

— *Targeted training and development programs have empowered our staff and partners, leading to improved performance in humanitarian interventions. The training on localization and proposal writing has particularly enhanced our engagement with stakeholders. (IRW)*

— *These capacity-strengthening efforts have been crucial in building a more capable and resilient organization. The training sessions on international standards and norms have prepared our local partners to attract funding from other institutions. (IRW)*

— *Our strategic planning has improved, thanks to collaborative localization approaches. (Local Partner)*



### Comprehensive Needs Assessments

Conducting thorough needs assessments and capacity mappings was another success factor identified and supported by document reviews. These assessments ensured that interventions were well-targeted to the specific needs of local communities and partners.

*The initial assessments helped us understand the unique challenges and strengths of each local partner, allowing us to tailor our support effectively. (IRW Country Office)*

### Inclusive Approach

An inclusive approach that involved various stakeholders, including local communities, staff, and partners, was frequently mentioned as a success factor. This inclusivity ensured that different perspectives were considered, leading to more holistic and sustainable implementation.

*Engaging local partners in the planning and implementation process increased their buy-in and ownership of the projects. (IRW Country Office)*



Importance of localization in triple nexus approach workshop, Iraq, 2023

### Clear Communication and Coordination

The importance of clear communication and coordination among all parties involved was another highlight. This facilitated smooth implementation and minimized misunderstandings or conflicts.

*Regular updates and transparent communication channels kept everyone informed and aligned, which was crucial for our collective success. (Local Partner)*

### Strong Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

The establishment of robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems was identified as a success factor that ensured accountability and continuous improvement. These systems helped track progress, assess impact, and make data-driven decisions.

### Challenges

The STRIDE-II program achieved significant progress, but it also encountered several challenges throughout its implementation. The challenges included a spectrum of issues, including limitations in resources, difficulties specific to local context, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the key hurdles faced by the program are as below.

### Resource Constraints

Securing and managing resources effectively proved to be a major hurdle for the STRIDE-II program. Budget constraints, including late funding and inflation fluctuations, impacted project timelines and activities. Limited financial resources also restricted the availability of qualified local partners and opportunities for staff capacity-strengthening and knowledge exchange across regions.

*Resource shortages have affected the scalability and sustainability of our projects, limiting their reach and impact. We need to continuously seek innovative solutions to bridge these gaps. (Local Partner)*

*We started with a planned budget for STRIDE-II however during the course of implementation, strong local currency fluctuations resulted in budget constraints. STRIDE-II team did support us to the extent they could, but they also had limits. (Local Partner)*



### Complex Contextual Factors

The political and regulatory environments in various regions posed significant challenges to project implementation. Political instability, bureaucratic hurdles, and stringent regulatory requirements posed significant challenges to project implementation. These also necessitated adaptive strategies and flexible approaches. These contextual complexities required careful planning and risk management to navigate successfully. Working with local partners who understand these regulations has been crucial for program success.

#### Limited Capacity of local partners

The limited capacity of local partners, particularly in terms of language, technical and financial expertise, was frequently cited as a challenge<sup>11</sup>. Capacity gaps across local partners were a recurring challenge. These gaps hindered effective program delivery and sustainability. Addressing these deficiencies through targeted capacity-strengthening interventions and skill development initiatives was essential for the growth and impact of the organization. Respondents emphasized the need for ongoing efforts to bridge these gaps and enhance the capabilities of all stakeholders involved.



*Continuous capacity-strengthening interventions are essential to bridge these gaps and enhance our operational effectiveness. (Local Partner)*



*The training on infographics and real-time tools has significantly improved our reporting and data visualization capabilities. (Local Partner)*

#### High Staff Turnover

High turnover rates among staff, particularly in IRW Country Offices and local partner offices, were identified as a major challenge. This affected continuity and the ability to maintain institutional knowledge and expertise.



*The frequent changes in staff meant we were constantly training new people, which disrupted our progress. (IRW Country Office)*

<sup>11</sup> Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2020: Internal document on 'Critical Analysis on Localization challenges and Way forward'



*We train the staff and then they leave for better opportunities. It is a big problem. We are now signing 5-year contracts with the new hires. (Local Partner)*

#### Coordination and Communication Gaps

Communication and coordination gaps continue to exist as pointed out by different stakeholders. These gaps between IRW headquarters, country offices, and local partners sometimes led to misunderstandings and program delays.



*There were instances where the headquarters and field offices were not aligned, causing delays in decision-making and affecting our implementation. (Local Partner)*

#### Security and Access Issues

The implementation of STRIDE-II was significantly hampered by security concerns, particularly in areas prone to conflict, and with restrictions on access.



*In regions like the DRC, ongoing conflicts and security issues severely restricted our ability to reach and support local communities. (IRW)*



Distribution of food packages in Nigeria, 2024



## OECD-DAC Criteria

The following overviews the STRIDE-II analysis through the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee evaluation framework.



### Relevance

The STRIDE-II program was designed to enhance the capacity of local organizations to effectively respond to crises. Evaluation results demonstrated that the program successfully addressed genuine challenges faced by local communities. It was implemented in countries vulnerable to disasters, focusing on empowering local NGOs, government officials, and community organizations. Participants highlighted the program as an invaluable tool for cultivating local leadership and enhancing organizational capacity. STRIDE-II is aligned with the objectives of C4C and the GB, emphasizing the importance of preparedness by enhancing the capabilities of local responders before emergencies occur.



### Coherence

IRW is a signatory to both the C4C and the GB, and the STRIDE-II program aligns with and contributes to achieving these commitments. STRIDE-II is recognized for its excellent synergies with other interventions and programs, enhancing its overall impact and effectiveness.



*STRIDE-II is a success story for me because it has a lot of synergies. It has opened opportunities for local organizations with other stakeholders. It has pushed localization theme in our network. (IRW)*



*It also aligns with our vision, mission and one of our core values – which has something to do with professionalism, we try as much as possible to equip our staff and volunteers, members with the right capacity and deliver the relevant sustainable services. Having the right skills means efficient, timely and effective delivery. And of course, it is not far from our strategic focus– we tend to explore opportunities from partners and others to support skill strengthening across the board. We see it as an opportunity. (Local Partner)*



## Efficiency

STRIDE-II was developed by incorporating the insights and learnings from STRIDE-I, resulting in a more efficient and effective program. Feedback from local partners and internal staff played a crucial role in shaping a more flexible design that considered country-specific contexts. Originally planned to span three years, the program faced delays due to external factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, donors generously extended the project by two more years to allow the program team and local partners to complete all activities. The focus of STRIDE-II remained on localization, with the program credited for reducing operational costs and improving overall impact. This iterative approach ensured that STRIDE-II was better equipped to address the unique challenges faced by each local partner, ultimately enhancing the program’s efficiency and sustainability.



*The STRIDE-II program has helped strengthen our own governance and system, that’s the board, NRCS and including top management in terms of building their capacity to not only mobilize resources to sustain the national society but are able to also implement and quality program that will touch the life of the vulnerable. (Local Partner)*



STRIDE team and IRW’s Global Microfinance Team conducting scoping exercise with NRCS, 2023



**Effectiveness**

Analysis of survey material indicates that the STRIDE-II program has been largely successful. Stakeholders across the board have acknowledged the effectiveness of its localization approach, which further facilitates the local partnerships. The program has demonstrably improved the preparedness of local partners in various countries for crisis situations. It has also empowered participating organizations by enhancing their capacity and enabling them to attract further funding opportunities. STRIDE-II has facilitated the delivery of training and knowledge transfer, ultimately strengthening the organizational and staff capabilities of local partners, allowing them to operate more effectively within their respective humanitarian fields.

**Impact**

STRIDE-II brought several positive advancements to disaster response efforts. It strengthened local organizations by providing training and resources, allowing them to better respond to crises. This included leadership development, improved internal management, and fundraising capabilities. Due diligence assessments were used not just for selection but also to identify areas where local partners could improve their operations. STRIDE-II also expanded geographically, bringing support to new regions in the Middle East and Africa. This focus on localization empowered local actors to design and implement their own response plans, ensuring self-sufficiency. The program demonstrably increased preparedness, with local teams in Nigeria mobilizing resources quickly during the 2023 floods. Finally, STRIDE-II promoted fairer partnerships by establishing clear guidelines and structures for collaboration, ensuring all voices are heard in the decision-making process.

*The program has been very impactful to Intercommunity Development Social Organization (IDS) as an organization because it's providing opportunities for us to develop or improve on the capacity of our Board of trustees in terms of resource mobilizations, advocacy, partnerships, and networking. (Local Partner)*

*Now we are using an accounting system that is QuickBooks. We're just starting in so many other areas. And in addition to that, the STRIDE-II program has also developed our organizational capacity in terms of monitoring, evaluation and learning. (Local Partner)*

**Sustainability**

The localization approach inherently facilitates sustainability. Interventions based on the STRIDE-II framework<sup>12</sup> cultivate a sense of ownership among local partners. While country offices enhance their preparedness capabilities, they are concurrently engaging local partners and government organizations in capacity-strengthening initiatives. This collaborative approach ensures that all stakeholders develop their capacities together. Ultimately, involving actors with the mandate to respond, the localization strategy guarantees a well-prepared and sustainable local response system.

Other organizations have recognized the focus on financial flexibility and self-sustainability through methods like social enterprise. However, legal restrictions in certain areas can hinder progress. The example of accessibility issues in Myanmar highlights the need for adaptable approaches to localization, as a one-size-fits-all strategy won't work everywhere.

In conclusion, STRIDE-II initiative has been effective in areas like improving response capacity, alignment with existing organizational goals, localization, etc. There's evidence it has contributed to localization efforts, however, certain on-ground challenges remain.



Management Development Program, Philippines, 2023

12 Islamic Relief Worldwide. (2023). [STRIDE Conceptual Framework 2023](#).



## OBJECTIVE 4: RECOMMENDATIONS

This section contains key recommendations resulting from the STRIDE-II analysis.

### Strengthening Localization

- To further strengthen partnerships with local organizations, involve local partners in the design stage of future STRIDE programs. This can be achieved by holding joint brainstorming sessions, conducting focus groups with local stakeholders, and actively seeking their feedback throughout the design process.
- To expand the program's reach to a wider range of countries, continue the existing approach to localization. Additionally, solicit suggestions for new target locations from local partners in the selected intervention countries. This collaboration will enhance ownership and sustainability while ensuring alignment with local priorities. A dedicated task force focusing on these localization efforts will further streamline program implementation and effectiveness.
- Addressing the challenges local organizations face in complying with due diligence processes is crucial. To enhance the due diligence process for local partners, develop relevant, clear, and easy-to-follow guidelines. Training workshops and dedicated staff support can help local organizations navigate the procedures efficiently. Furthermore, explore remote verification methods, such as video conferencing or document verification services, to reduce the burden of in-person visits.

### Enhancing Program Management and Sustainability

- To ensure the successful long-term implementation of the STRIDE program, develop and share a list of pre-defined training areas with local partners. This will facilitate their decision-making process for capacity strengthening trajectories, allowing them to prioritize their training needs effectively. This resource will be particularly valuable when a local partner struggles to identify and prioritize the most relevant training areas. The training areas may include:
  - » Project Management
  - » Monitoring and Evaluation
  - » Human Resource Management
  - » Fundraising
  - » Additional technical skills related to disaster management and recovery
- Considering the comprehensive onboarding process—which includes new partner identification, finalization, integration, training, and internal due diligence—a five-year duration for the next STRIDE program is recommended. This extended timeline will ensure that all aspects of the program are thoroughly addressed and that local partners are adequately supported throughout the process.
- STRIDE is an institutional development program that focuses on integrating insights and project knowledge gleaned from three years of successful pilot projects into regular programs and core operations. Upon the completion of the STRIDE program, a robust transition plan is crucial to empower local partners to operate independently with the implemented improvements.

- To further strengthen this transition plan, the inclusion of several key elements is recommended:
  - » **Engagement Strategy:** Develop a comprehensive strategy to maintain active and continuous engagement with local partners.
  - » **Ownership and Accountability Framework:** Establish clear frameworks to ensure local partners take ownership and remain accountable for the improvements.
  - » **Sustainability Planning:** Create detailed plans to ensure the sustainability of the implemented changes.
  - » **Knowledge Transfer Strategies:** Develop tailored strategies for effective knowledge transfer, addressing the specific needs of local partners.
  - » **Recruitment:** To enhance IRW's capacity for higher engagement and future program expansion, recruiting more staff is seen as necessary. This will ensure that IRW can provide the required support and maintain the momentum of program successes.

### Improving Monitoring and Evaluation

- Currently, upon program completion, there is no formal mechanism to assess the impact of the training and capacity-strengthening initiatives on the local partners' disaster preparedness capabilities. Developing a long-term monitoring and evaluation framework will be crucial to track progress, identify challenges, and improve partnerships over time. This evaluation framework will encompass key areas addressed in training programs:

#### Governance:

- » **Leadership Performance:** Assess the effectiveness of leadership training by evaluating improvements in decision-making, strategic planning, and crisis management. Collect feedback from staff and stakeholders to measure leadership effectiveness and organizational morale.
- » **Board and Management:** Monitor the roles and effectiveness of board members and management in providing direction and oversight. Assess how well governance structures have been strengthened and their impact on organizational stability.

#### Financial Management:

- » **Financial Practices:** Track adherence to best financial practices taught during training sessions. Evaluate improvements in budgeting, financial reporting, and auditing processes.
- » **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):** Monitor progress towards financial KPIs established during the program. These may include revenue growth, cost management, financial transparency, and sustainability metrics.

#### Disaster Preparedness:

- » **Preparedness Evaluation:** Measure the readiness of local partners against the training



plan. This includes assessing the development and implementation of disaster response plans, emergency procedures, and resource mobilization strategies.

**Simulation Drills and Exercises:** Conduct regular disaster simulation drills to test the preparedness of local partners. Evaluate their response times, coordination efficiency, and overall effectiveness in handling simulated crises.

### Business Sustainability and Funding:

- » **Sustainability Plans:** Assess the development and execution of sustainability plans. This includes long-term strategic planning, diversification of funding sources, and initiatives to ensure organizational resilience.
- » **Funding and Resource Mobilization:** Track the ability of local partners to attract and manage funding post-training. Evaluate the effectiveness of fundraising strategies, donor engagement, and grant management practices.
- By focusing on these key evaluation areas, the long-term monitoring and evaluation framework will provide a comprehensive overview of the impact of the STRIDE program on local partners. This approach will help identify areas of success and opportunities for improvement, ensuring that the program's benefits are sustained and enhanced over time, particularly in disaster management scenarios.

### Funding Strategies

- Recommendations highlight the need for increased funding for the program. The current budget is widely seen as just enough to meet program essentials.
- The respondents also explored the possibility of securing funding from alternative sources to accommodate higher budgets. Social financing was mentioned explicitly as a viable option for achieving this objective. NGOs can leverage a variety of social financing options to secure resources. These options include crowdfunding platforms, cause marketing partnerships, social media fundraising tools, and dedicated financial institutions specializing in the social sector.
- To achieve wider program coverage, allocating a larger budget to a network or group of local partners within one target area can be more effective than funding a single partner. Furthermore, strengthening the program's impact through enhanced localization and partnerships will also generate additional synergies and efficiencies in its implementation. These benefits may include:
  - » **Sharing of resources and expertise:** Local partners can contribute their unique strengths to the table. This could involve sharing personnel with specialized skills, equipment, or even local knowledge of the area at risk. By combining resources, the overall effectiveness of the program is amplified.
  - » **Improved coordination and communication:** A network establishes better communication and collaboration among partners. This helps to avoid duplication of efforts and ensures that all aspects of disaster management are addressed comprehensively. Regular meetings and information sharing can help to streamline the response and recovery process.

- » **Increased local ownership and sustainability:** Local partners are more invested in the success of the program since the well-being of their community is directly tied to the outcome. They also have a deeper understanding of the local context and needs, which allows for the development of culturally appropriate and sustainable solutions.

### Additional Considerations

- The recommendations call for making localization and partnership efforts more visible internally for higher awareness of STRIDE achievements within the IRW team members.
  - » Develop clear and concise informational materials that elucidate the STRIDE program and its role within the broader IRW framework. Disseminate these materials for regular program updates internally.
  - » Conduct periodic online briefings specifically focused on STRIDE to enhance internal knowledge sharing.
  - » Implement a structured system for capturing learnings from the STRIDE project. This system could involve the compilation of regular case studies and comprehensive reports.
  - » In collaboration with local partners, establish Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure and track the effectiveness of their capacity development. Disseminate regular internal reports highlighting the various project outcomes to conclusively demonstrate the value proposition of the STRIDE program.
- Establishing the STRIDE program as a permanent and organization-wide practice for greater implementation, and benefit realization across the IRW.
- Considering the growing importance of climate adaptation, incorporating these strategies into STRIDE programs is highly recommended. The following outlines some potential approaches for achieving this:
  - » Refine existing programs to include climate-smart practices, vulnerability assessments, and policy advocacy for adaptation.
  - » Offer programs on community resilience building, nature-based solutions, and accessing climate finance.
  - » Partner with experts, create knowledge-sharing platforms, and facilitate South-South cooperation.
- Facilitating knowledge sharing and exchange programs among IRW local partners is valuable for mutual learning. An online networking place can be established that connects local partners from various countries on a single platform. This platform would enable them to exchange their learnings and best practices in climate adaptation strategies. Additionally, an exchange program could be implemented where a key team member from one local partner visits a counterpart organization in another similar country. This immersive experience would allow them to learn from established practices firsthand.
- Finally, ensuring that lessons learned from STRIDE-II are embedded into STRIDE III will be vital for continuous improvement.





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