# HRSM Reflection Session Summary

This document serves as the summary of the reflection session discussions with partners under the Human Rights Support Mechanism (HRSM) LWA. The objective of the session was to address the challenges encountered and lessons learned throughout the program, with a particular emphasis on applying these insights to future collaborations or future USAID pre-competed mechanisms. The discussions underscored the importance of pre-competed mechanisms, recognizing their value in offering flexibility, efficiency, and access to specialized technical expertise. Additionally, the reflection session provided an opportunity to critically reflect on the areas where improvements can be made. *The reflections from this session are subjective and reflect the opinions of attendees so any recommendations should not be considered known best practices.*

Rapid Response Portfolio:

Challenges**:** The rapid response portfolio faced numerous challenges that centered around several key areas, including localization, award size, unclear mission expectations, and speed of granting. One significant concern revolved around the lack of clarity particularly in projects where support to local partners was not the main focus and exceptions were considered. Many grants involved providing support to local governments or local partners, leading to a lack of understanding and clarity among these partners. As a result of the urgency inherent in rapid response calls, some organizations found themselves pressed for time and unable to create precise budget estimates, often resorting to requesting maximum funds to compensate for uncertainties. Another issue arose from the inconsistent and unclear mission expectations, making it challenging for partners to anticipate when missions would be open to receiving partner-driven concept notes. Moreover, despite Freedom House's efforts to expedite the grant processing, delays were unavoidable due to various factors, including missions, Freedom House itself, and partner organizations. Lastly, while the rapid response grants did not require a Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) component to facilitate faster implementation and flexible management budgets, this absence meant that there was a lack of documented lessons learned on the process or implementation, hindering improvements for future initiatives.

Solutions: To address these challenges comprehensively, future processes for the Rapid Response Grant (RRG) program should incorporate clear and robust guidance on localization. This should encompass a precise definition of what qualifies as funds for local partners, along with the provision of a financial assessment tool or methodology to determine appropriate award sizes, and a streamlined process for exemptions. Additionally, continuous education for missions is paramount to ensure the effective implementation of RRG mechanisms. The HRSM team should undertake regular updates of their materials, ensuring they remain current and accessible to aid in seamless communication with missions when necessary. Furthermore, it is essential to conduct reflection sessions at the conclusion of each rapid response grant to document and capture valuable lessons learned. This knowledge-sharing process should extend beyond Freedom House, with a deliberate effort to socialize the lessons learned with implementers and USAID on an annual basis. Such sharing and dissemination of insights would contribute to ongoing improvements in the portfolio's execution and outcomes.

One-Team Approach:

Challenges: When multiple consortium partners collaborate on a single associate award, several challenges were identified in achieving smooth implementation. These include concerns over duplicate work on assessments, unclear delineation of roles and responsibilities, ambiguity regarding internal policies and procedures among consortium partners, and the need for frequent communication between partner organizations. While the concept of a one-team approach offers the potential to leverage each partner's specialization, security considerations can sometimes hinder seamless collaboration among partners.

Solutions: To address these challenges effectively, programs utilizing the one-team approach should allocate resources for a research and assessment coordination staff person during the implementation period. This individual would ensure timely and coordinated assessments that cater to the needs of all consortium partners, thereby minimizing duplication of effort. Additionally, the project's management teams from each partner should develop a shared understanding of one another's internal policies and procedures pertaining to grants management. To address any discrepancies, a joint meeting between compliance and finance teams should be organized to foster clarity and alignment. Furthermore, in cases where security constraints impede the smooth exchange of information between partner organizations, projects should be designed in a manner that allows objectives to be achieved independently, ensuring stand-alone completion.

Allocation of Associate Awards

Challenges: Although most consortium partners acknowledged the fairness of associate award allocations, HRSM encountered moderate challenges relating to overlapping scopes, decision-making speed, and transparency. These issues posed hurdles to efficient operations.

Solutions: To address these challenges, HRSM partners expressed the desire for Freedom House to assume a stronger role in determining how the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) aligned with existing scopes of work. Utilizing agreed-upon partner scopes proved beneficial in resolving allocation conflicts. However, it is recommended that these scopes be treated as living documents and periodically updated in collaboration with the consortium, potentially as part of the work plan. This ensures alignment between scopes of work and the desired results HRSM aims to achieve. By doing so, each organization can clearly drive the expected impact within their respective awards or provide relevant technical expertise and oversight.

Furthermore, although partners acknowledged the effectiveness of private conversations between Freedom House and individual partner organizations in expediting decision-making, it is suggested that this step be formalized and included as written guidance in the associate award allocation process. Sharing this written guidance frequently would enhance transparency regarding the decision-making process. Additionally, conducting unofficial advance allocation meetings before the NOFO is released by the mission would accelerate the decision-making process, further streamlining operations.

Monitoring Evaluation and Learning

Challenges: The implementation of Monitoring and Learning (MEL) within the HRSM mechanism encountered significant challenges. These included issues with the commitment to the results framework outlined in the proposal, difficulties in aggregating indicators across the award, inadequate integration of learning into associate award implementations, and insufficient knowledge exchange within the consortium. Specifically, the initial results framework did not align with the scope of associate award projects that the mission was willing to fund. As a result, the indicators lacked relevance in measuring impact, and the learning agenda based on the results framework poorly matched the on-the-ground activities. Furthermore, limited communication between the HRSM team and implementing teams after project kick-offs created little incentive for individual associate award teams to engage in collective learning efforts.

Solutions: Two possible approaches can be taken to facilitate effective MEL within LWAs: a proscriptive approach and an inductive approach.

The proscriptive approach mandates the integration of MEL throughout the award process, ensuring that all associate awards align with the existing results framework. By requiring all associate awards to adhere to the results framework, the shared indicators would have been more relevant to the success of specific programs. Furthermore, aligning the learning agenda questions with the results framework would have facilitated the design of activities to address those questions, such as implementing structured pilot programs and allocating budgets for their evaluation. However, the proscriptive approach necessitates significant intervention in program design to ensure consistent application of the results framework and the inclusion of comparative learning opportunities from the early stages. It is therefore crucial to socialize this approach from the outset, both within USAID and among implementing partners.

The inductive approach relies on observational data obtained through quarterly reporting on the awards to identify common themes and patterns. This data then serves as a basis for further exploration through reflection sessions and exchanges facilitated by the MEL specialist. To effectively implement the inductive approach, implementing teams should have comprehensive templates for self-guided quarterly reflections, and the reports should be validated through follow-up conversations. Reporting of indicators should be done at a high level to capture broad trends, as award activities may not align with predefined indicators. The inductive method ensures that learning is relevant and closely tied to on-the-ground activities. However, it may result in smaller case studies, less rigorous testing of approaches, and challenges in planning future learning products due to the reliance on observational and reflective data collection.

In both approaches, it is essential to continually refine and socialize the results framework to ensure that associate awards contribute to the overarching goals. Additionally, compared to HRSM's funding model, a greater allocation of funds should be reserved for exchanges and professional development of field MEL staff, who typically possess stronger monitoring skills than learning practices. Lastly, regardless of the chosen method, implementing teams require comprehensive socialization regarding the importance of learning. Allocating LOE to MEL staff at partner organization headquarters, as well as the Freedom House MEL staff, could have mitigated collaboration issues between the MEL specialist and program staff.

Staffing

Challenges: The HRSM mechanism faced challenges related to inconsistent staffing structure and varying staffing needs throughout the award period. This frequently resulted in inadequate staffing for crucial roles such as the Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI) advisor, communications personnel, and Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) specialist. Additionally, the high turnover experienced at Freedom House, implementing partners' headquarters, country offices, and missions imposed additional demands on the HRSM team for continuous socialization efforts.

Solutions: To address these challenges, HRSM would have greatly benefited from allocating higher Level of Effort (LOE) to several key positions. First and foremost, dedicating more staff LOE to the Gender and Social Inclusion Advisor role would have ensured effective support in incorporating gender and social inclusion considerations across the program. Similarly, a higher LOE for the MEL specialist would have enhanced monitoring, evaluation, and learning efforts, facilitating robust data collection and analysis. Additionally, allocating increased LOE to communications and graphic design roles would have improved the dissemination of program information and enhanced visual representation of key messages. Lastly, having an expert on localization with higher LOE would have provided valuable insights and guidance in effectively implementing localization strategies.

By increasing LOE for these critical positions, HRSM would have been better equipped to address staffing needs and ensure the smooth implementation of the program.