



Management Response by SDC/HA Senior Management to the Evaluation Report “External review of the Swiss Humanitarian Aid (SHA) Unit”

Introduction

Saving lives and alleviating suffering – this is the mandate of the Swiss Humanitarian Aid (SDC/HA)¹.

Operating before, during and after crisis and disasters, the SDC/HA assumes the following triple role:

- Implement projects as a pragmatic and effective operational actor in the field;
- Be a reliable and flexible humanitarian partner and donor for humanitarian organisations;
- Be an advocate for the respect of the humanitarian law and principles.

A main asset of the SDC/HA is its Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit (SHA). The SHA – a pool of approximately 600 experts with various professional backgrounds - is based on decree 172.211.31² of the Swiss Government and Administration Organisation Act. The decree defines the SHA as being attached to the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC); describes the SHA's mission to carry out emergency relief, reconstruction and disaster risk reduction interventions; defines the leadership and authority of the Swiss Delegate for Humanitarian Affairs regarding the SHA.

SHA experts can be deployed at any time to wherever humanitarian assistance is needed, whether in crises, natural disaster or armed conflicts. They can be tasked to: 1. Carry out rapid response actions after sudden and onset disasters; 2. Implement humanitarian projects of the SDC/HA (direct actions); 3. Provide technical expertise to partner organisations (secondments) and 4. Support the HQ or Swiss representations abroad (during crises).

In 2018 the SDC/HA launched a process on the future of its operational arm, the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit, as the humanitarian landscape has changed in recent years, with an increase in the number of armed conflicts, of humanitarian crises, their complexity and duration. The institutional context for the SHA has evolved as well over time. Along the past decade, the FDFA has undertaken measures to increase coherence, better integrate and mainstream the different directorates, services and representations, and to harmonize processes and instruments.

These changes have consequences and require adaptations. It is against this background that the SDC/HA has launched a process on the future of the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit with the overall goal to strengthen the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit as the operational arm of the SDC/HA, including an external review.

Evaluation purpose

Considering the evolving global environment, the main objective of the external review was to determine the **relevance** and **added value** of the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit's contribution to the core mandate of SDC/HA which is saving lives and alleviating suffering. Based on these findings, the review draws conclusions and formulates recommendations on how to strengthen the SHA as operational arm of the SDC/HA in light of the future orientation of Switzerland's international cooperation as foreseen in the federal dispatch 2021-24³ and beyond.

¹ Swiss Humanitarian Aid (SDC/HA) is part of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA).

² <https://www.admin.ch/opc/de/classified-compilation/19880091/>

³ <https://www.eda.admin.ch/deza/en/home/news/dossiers/alle-dossiers/iza-2021-2024.html>

Evaluation methodology

The Evaluation was mandated as a result of an open call for offers process, through which 12 offers were submitted, to a team of external consultants of KEK-CDC and ebaix. The evaluation applied a mixed-method approach which consisted of (i) Intensive document review, (ii) Reconstruction of a Theory of Change, (iii) semi-structured interviews with SHA members, SDC staff and partners, (iv) meetings and focus group interviews with members of the Expert Groups and SDC HA desk officers, (v) An online survey among all active as well as reserve members and those who left the SHA after 01.01.2018 (this included 892 people altogether), (vi) Participation in an H-webinar of SDC HA, (vii) Conducting an option workshop for alternative organisational structures, (viii) Analysis of five case studies, namely Haiti, Mozambique, Myanmar, Jordan and Ukraine, and (ix) Analysis of selected quantitative data (e.g. deployment statistics 2015-2019 and financial data). The foreseen visits to Myanmar and Jordan had to be cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions and thus all case studies were based on document review and physical, telephone or online interviews (47 interviews).

SDC/ HA Senior management's (SM) response to the conclusions of the evaluation report

Trends in the HA sector: SM agrees with the evaluators' assessment, that the frequency of natural disasters increases and that this trend will continue in coming years due to climate change. Even though there are less fatalities due to improved coping capacities in many countries, there are increasing numbers of people and of basic services affected by disasters. The trend to continuously increasing displacement and migration due to armed conflicts, violence, environmental degradation and related risks like water availability, draughts and floods is confirmed by the evaluation. SM also agrees with the evaluators' conclusion that the humanitarian needs - funding gap will continue to widen in the future.

Within long-term protracted crises, the combination of humanitarian, development and peace instruments in a nexus approach is essential in order to respond effectively, to reach sustainable results and reduce humanitarian needs in the long run. SM does not fully subscribe to the evaluators' perception that the integration of the foreign policy instruments within Swiss Embassies necessarily implies a "trend of bureaucratisation of HA". However, SM acknowledges that the landscape of stakeholders and processes within the integrated structures are currently rather heavy and sometimes slow, which is a challenge and sometimes obstacle to the operational humanitarian work of the SHA instrument.

SM agrees that the mitigation of security threats is of ever increasing importance in humanitarian aid. Localization of aid is key in order to recognize and strengthen the leadership of local actors and their role as first responders, to better address the needs of local populations and to prepare local actors for future crises. The COVID-19 pandemic has made access to beneficiaries for both local and international aid workers even more challenging. SM agrees that empowering local actors who are familiar with the context and present on the ground before, during and after a crisis is of utmost importance. However, SM is also convinced that international humanitarian support must continue to be provided in situations where local capacities are overstretched and that transferring the security risks increasingly to local actors only, is not acceptable on the basis of humanitarian principles. SHA therefore has to maintain and increase its own security management and mitigation capacities to remain fit for purpose.

Relevance of the SHA Unit and added value: SM takes note of the evaluators' confirmation that "The SHA Unit significantly contributes to the overall goals of Swiss HA" and that "The image of the SHA Unit in Switzerland is strongly associated with Rapid Response Teams by the Swiss public, media and members of parliament, although 99% of the Unit's 134 full-time equivalents (average 2010–2019) are allocated to the other three deployment modes." Indeed, the "qualified and motivated experts with a strong identification with the corps and with their respective Expert Groups" are the HA/SHA's main asset, provide solid and visible Swiss expertise, "support the strengthening of partner organisations, and feed into the advocacy and policy dialogue". The main added values of the four deployment modes, which are lined out in the Report, namely "(i) High visibility of Swiss presence in the field and with partners, (ii) Linking the working experience of experts on the ground with policy dialogue and advocacy, (iii) Support for monitoring and programme, and (iv) Project implementation in crises contexts", as well as the function as a 'door opener' for Swiss representations shall be maintained and further developed.

Appropriateness of the SHA Unit's strategic orientation, organisational and managerial structure: SM agrees that today's humanitarian context often requires longer deployments of experienced staff, and that the gap between rapid response deployments and deployments in protracted crises situations has widened, impacting on careers and career perspectives of SHA members. SM takes note of the evaluators' view, that the current approach to SHA's "Swissness" is not in line with a trend to internationalize similar pools of experts. Furthermore, SM understands the perception, that the Delegate for HA – due to his many other tasks within SDC and HA – is rather "removed" from SHA day-to-day operations. SM therefore shares the Report's view, that explicitly formulating a "vision" for SHA and strengthening SHA's management set up should be undertaken. SM also agrees that reviewing and potentially adapting the structure of EGs in order to guarantee a high level of professionalism, coordination and functioning of SHA in future is timely. SM takes note of the evaluators' view that the SHA expertise could be beneficial for other SDC departments and potentially for Swiss NGO, e.g. to provide technical backstopping. This view will have to be further analysed on the background of the upcoming organizational reform (SDC 2030, fit for purpose), which implies to integrate humanitarian competencies into all units of SDC.

SM acknowledges the evaluators' efforts to shape four options for SHA's potential future organizational set up. Based on its current assessment SM is determined to maintain SHA as the operational arm of SDC/HA within SDC's organizational setup. However, SM is convinced that adaptations regarding SHA's strategic orientation and organizational setup have to be initiated, in order to maintain and further develop SHA's relevance in today's and tomorrow's humanitarian context. SM would have appreciated if the evaluators' four options would have been developed in more details and if advantages and disadvantages as well as the consequences and feasibilities of each option could have been assessed in more depth. However SM acknowledges that this would have overstretched the evaluations' mandate and the working days' allocated within the mandate. Therefore, SM suggests to analyse these four options further by designing and implementing a systematic organizational development process of the SHA Unit.



Senior Management's response to the recommendations of the report

Recommendation	Agree / partly agree/ disagree	Management response and measures	Responsible / Deadline
Strategy and vision			
1: SDC should continue deploying Swiss HA expertise and should further strengthen its expertise to support people with humanitarian needs after emergencies or during protracted crises.	Agree	<p>SDC's Directorate has taken note of the evaluation's finding, confirming that Swiss HA expertise adds value to meet increasing global humanitarian needs.</p> <p>SDC is determined to uphold Switzerland's humanitarian tradition (ref. Swiss Foreign Policy 2020 – 2023 / Swiss International Cooperation Strategy 2021 – 2024). The SHA Unit will thus continue to be a key component of Switzerland's global humanitarian response in the coming years and within "SDC 2030". The four deployment modes (RR, DA, secondments, support to representations) are to be further developed and used.</p> <p>How SHA Unit's thematic expertise, way of operating and its organisational structure and functioning can be optimally made fit for future purpose is to be analysed and determined within the recommendations 2 and 3. Recommendations 2 – 11, that support implementing recommendation 1, shall be implemented in line with belows specifications. To this end, the Delegate has assigned the task to coordinate the implementation of the recommendations accordingly to a SM team member.</p>	Overall: Delegate
2: An organisational development process should be initiated to analyse whether the SHA Unit remains as the operational HA arm within the Swiss Government or whether an alternative organisational setup for the SHA Unit offers better prospects.	Partly agree	<p>An organizational development process (OD) will be initiated, working with clear priority towards SHA Unit 2.0. SHA is a key instrument of the Swiss government's humanitarian aid. SDC is committed to keep this instrument within its organizational set up. Other options lined out by the Review shall however be further analysed within the process as well, in order to integrate strengths of other options to the extent possible into SHA Unit 2.0. Implications of SDC 2030 are to be taken into consideration as well as the results of recommendations 3 and</p>	Head of H-Africa division / member of SM Dec. '22.
		<p>HA-Staff and HR-field. OD process to start in August '21 and conclude by Dec. '22.</p>	

		8 of this review. The necessary financial and HR are to be allocated to support the OE process.	
3: A new refreshed vision for the corps should provide a clear common understanding about the SHA Unit deployment modes and their interaction with other Swiss HA and FDFA instruments.	Agree	A refreshed "vision" in the form of an Operational concept 2030 (OC) shall be developed through a process integrated with the organizational development process (rec. 2). This vision shall build on the Operational concept 2010 – 2014 and shall take the findings and recommendations of the evaluation and the implications of SDC Vision 2030 into account.	H-Staff March '22.
Structure, resources and coordination			
4: The management should be strengthened by the establishment of a head of SHA Unit who should have the authority to take operational decisions.	Partly agree	SM agrees with the recommendation to strengthen SHA management. However, a decision regarding a potential "Head of Unit" function will be taken in tune with SDC 2030 and the SHA OD process (rec. 2). The future organisational set up of SDC and HA will determine the Delegate's time resources available for SHA's management and in turn the need to assign SHA management tasks to a Head of Unit function.	Delegate June '22.
5: Selection and retention criteria of the corps members should be improved to ensure efficient management of the pool of experts.	Agree	SM agrees to sharpen the selection and retention criteria. First steps have been taken already. The communication of selection criteria applied for RR/ short term missions will be improved and included in RR trainings. The status of pool members is already revised every year and is proactively communicated to pool members in case of changes. Measures for a more performance based pool management shall be developed.	HR-field Dec. '21.
6. The organizational structure and functioning of the four deployment modes of the SHA Unit should be optimized by:			
6.a. Strengthening the Rapid Response Teams (RRTs) by improving mobilisation and transparency (communication) of deployments.	Agree	Introduction of a Rapid Response deployment alert for registered RRT-Members (similar to the UNDAC System) shall be implemented, using the "Plato" platform. Mobilization processes are well established, ISO certified and transparent, but communication efforts regarding these processes may still be improved and increased, ensuring maximum transparency.	HR-Feld with RR, April '22
6b. Carefully assessing the overall context and the added value of the Swiss expertise while	Partly agree	Agree that assessing the overall context and the added value of DA shall in any case be carefully analysed, as any other modality. Such	H-Staff, with working group /

designing Direct Actions (DAs).		analysis should be reflected in the respective documentation (credit proposal, H-OpKom); this can be further developed. The Senior Management (SM) views DA as relevant contributions to the Swiss humanitarian response, to the reputation of Switzerland as a competent humanitarian actor, and to SHAs skills development and knowledge management, both in Nexus as well as in non-Nexus situations. Therefore any new measures shall not introduce additional restrictions or complications for DAs.	Nov. '21
6c: Strengthening the process for deploying secondees to ensure clear added value and achievable terms of reference (ToR).	Partly agree	SM agrees, that the process for deploying secondees shall be strengthened. However, the "Rules of Engagement" for secondments - designed specifically to this end - have been introduced in 2020 only. They have been reviewed in the beginning of 2021 with no significant findings, also due to the Covid-19 pandemic and less deployments. They will be reviewed in 2022, based on the first 2 years of using them. A decision if additional measures are to be introduced will be taken accordingly at the end of 2022.	H-Staff and HR-Feld, Dec. '22
6d: Broadening the tasks and intensifying SHA expert support for technical backstopping, advisory services and coaching for projects of the other SDC departments, (Swiss) NGOs and local partners.	Agree	Backstopping, advisory services and coaching shall be a relevant contribution of SHA in future crises settings, especially but not exclusively for local partners.	To be taken up within 'vision' and OD Process (rec.2 & 3)
7: Restructure, reduce and focus the current Experts Groups (EGs) to address future needs and rebrand their purpose and way of functioning.	Partly agree	SM agrees with a regrouping and reduction of expert groups; however, SM is not fully convinced, that the proposed adaptations are ideal. Regrouping "technical" and "support" EGs would be another option and should be further looked into. Priority themes are to be further analysed and DEZA 2030 to be taken into account. A decision should be taken within the organizational development process (rec. 2)	To be taken up within OD Process (rec.2)
8: Find a way how to retain experienced SHA members in the corps despite the 10-year-rule for SHA Unit contracts.	Agree	SM agrees that retaining experienced members within SHA is a key necessity to keep up with the humanitarian mandate in today's and tomorrow's context. Thorough and long term humanitarian experience is a necessary precondition especially for senior positions in order to implement humanitarian operations in complex environments. However, FDFA/SDC/SHA has to fully comply with the given legal framework ,	Working group led by HR-field; March '22

		which prohibits the unlimited stringing together of fixed-term contracts. This has to be taken into account when exploring options to retain SHA members. Alternatives, such as actively supporting SHA members to find other employments for some time and to be retained as reserve members are to be analysed as well. Transparent communication towards the members remains important.	
Communication and knowledge management			
9: Improved mutual understanding within FDFA of the various HA, developmental and peace promotion instruments, including the four SHA deployment modes and their strengths and weaknesses, is required.	Agree	SDC 2030 offers a fresh opportunity to increase mutual understanding among IC instruments and to make SHA deployment modes known more widely. Internal communication measures taking into account the SDC 2030 changes will be defined and implemented in 2022.	H-Staff, March '22
10: SDC HA should review its evaluation practice to promote independent and/or peer reviews, enhance evidence-based learning and strengthen the knowledge management system.	Agree	Institutional learning should indeed be strengthened by significantly increasing the number of evaluations and peer reviews within HA interventions. For DA above a threshold of CHF 1 million commissioning an external review will become mandatory. A further bureaucratization through heavy evaluation processes is to be avoided. Processes shall be applied that are light enough to comply with the needs and contexts of humanitarian settings.	H-Staff, in consultation with E&C and KLC, Dec. '21
11: The utilisation and exchange of knowledge and best practices between SHA experts (and EGs) and the SDC networks should be fostered.	Partly agree	The future role and functioning of SDC networks will be reviewed within the SDC 2030 process. A close collaboration and link to the new established thematic units and networks of SDC shall be set up according to SDC 2030 decisions.	Heads of expert groups Dec. '22.

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