MIGRATION EMERGENCY RESPONSE FUND RESEARCH PIECE:
THE EFFECTIVENESS, IMPACT, RELEVANCE, AND COHERENCE OF A MIGRATION-SPECIFIC RAPID RESPONSE FUND
JUNE 2020
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Special acknowledgment for the Start Network members, Start Network staff, and DFID who provided their time and perspective generously for this research piece.

Ravenstone Consult is a research, analysis, policy development and programme management consultancy group offering expertise across the humanitarian and development sector. It has a special focus on migration, refugees, vulnerability and children on the move, offering a range of services to assist public and private interests in the sector. Its goal is to contribute to improved responses to displacement, child protection, human trafficking, and migrant smuggling through a deeper collective understanding of the dynamics of forced and voluntary mobility. Christopher Horwood is a co-director of Ravenstone Consult. Fran Beytrison is a Ravenstone specialist consultant.
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SECTION 1:
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
This research piece attempts to navigate the discussion and explore Start Network members’, donors’ and Start staff perceptions and experiences of the Start Network’s dedicated Migration Emergency Response Fund (MERF), with a view to making practical recommendations in support of Start Network’s institutional engagement with mixed migration going forward.

Using a mixed methods approach involving literature review, online survey and key informant interviews (KIs) the researchers received 52 survey responses and undertook 29 Skype, Zoom or telephone interviews. Respondents included staff from Start Network, member INGOs, national NGO partners and donors at country, regional and headquarters levels.

Using the lenses of effectiveness, impact, relevance and coherence, MERF is shown to be a highly effective and well-functioning fund achieving many of its objectives and enabling member agencies to respond rapidly in discrete migration emergency crises in its various geographical jurisdictions. However, the research also showed that MERF raises significant strategic and structural questions. Seventeen key findings were established through the analysis (Section 5 of this report) and are grouped here to pick out the following four strategic areas as outlined below, and in response to which eighteen recommendations are made in section 6 of this report.

STRATEGIC AREA #1: MERF PROVIDES USEFUL ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING INTO THE ADDED VALUE OF REGIONAL AND CONTEXT- OR THEMATIC-SPECIFIC TEAMS

Key Finding: Regional presence and close collaboration at field level are highly valued by members, bringing unanticipated benefits in coordination in particular. The potential for collective advocacy by members is not fully exploited

Key Finding: Contextual and/or migration knowledge amongst members involved in allocation processes is considered fundamental amongst members

Key Finding: Start Fund is a recognized brand, particularly amongst members with strong UK presence. MERF did not always benefit from this brand familiarity and lower levels of familiarity amongst field actors in primarily francophone MERF 2\(^1\) regions may have contributed to a lower uptake amongst members. Outreach required substantial investments including physical visits to countries and agencies from the regional MERF team

Key Finding: English as the sole working language can be an impediment for INGO members and local partners alike – agencies working with the MERF Coordinator based regionally in Tunis highly rated their ability to communicate in French.

STRATEGIC AREA #2: DECISIONS ON START NETWORK FINANCING MECHANISMS ARE NOT SYSTEMATICALLY EMBEDDED IN RELEVANT CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Key Finding: Donor engagement was perceived by Members to compromise the INGO identity of Start Network and MERF, in particular its peer to peer collaboration

Key Finding: The principle of a dedicated migration fund is valued, but humanitarian parameters proved to be restrictive for MERF 2 to achieve impact

\(^1\) The MERF has seen two iterations since 2017, which for ease will be referred to as MERF 1 (January 2017 – November 2017) and MERF 2 (July 2018 – December 2020). Each operated with different geographical restrictions and under a slightly different rule regime.
**Key Finding:** MERF 1 which operated primarily in Eastern Europe was seen to operate at greater scale and speed than MERF 2 operating in North, West and Central Africa, suggesting a greater need for the MERF I model.

**Key Finding:** Insufficient analysis at the design stages resulted in a disconnect between the migration context as a protection and human rights (development) crisis and MERF as a humanitarian assistance fund first and foremost: context-specific, needs-based analysis as a basis for designing and funding response mechanisms such as the MERF is essential.

### STRATEGIC AREA #3: MIXED MIGRATION IS EXPECTED TO CONTINUE TO REQUIRE FLEXIBLE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE CAPACITY GLOBALLY

**Key Finding:** Strict parameters of criteria and / or budget requirements may at times prevent relevant interventions from taking place. MERF 2 appears to be curiously inflexible with regard to smaller, chronic or anticipatory actions.

**Key Finding:** The Collaborative Information Collection and Analysis (CICA) grants were seen as useful, but difficult to initiate with member agencies rarely having pre-positioned capacity to actually deploy for assessments.

**Key Finding:** Geographic restrictions were repeatedly seen as a drawback by many respondents and interviewees.

**Key Finding:** Wide acceptance that mixed migration flows will continue to be a global phenomenon, requiring at times emergency responses in the future, and a broad consensus on a need for greater attention and funding for migration including outside emergency contexts due to the systemic issues around movement and associated politics.

### STRATEGIC AREA #4: WHICH ‘NICHE’ SHOULD START NETWORK FAVOUR REGARDING MIGRATION, CONCERNING WHAT CONSTITUTES AN EMERGENCY RESPONSE IN AN AMBIVALENT CONTEXT, AND START NETWORK’S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ‘NEXUS’ DISCUSSION

**Key Finding:** Start Network offers highly valued contingency funds.

**Key Finding:** Start Network’s specialised fund for migration as singled out as a special humanitarian issue is a source of strategic tension.

**Key Finding:** Where MERF plays a similar emergency function to the Start Fund in responding to new needs, vulnerable groups and spikes, the Start Fund would suffice. However, MERF’s experiences have highlighted the chronic structural gaps and neglected crises in migration response more broadly in a way that Start Fund could not / would not have responded to.

**Key Finding:** Humanitarian needs in chronic, underserved or under the radar crises are often harder to isolate and address through standard humanitarian assistance responses. This is typically the case in mixed migration contexts.

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2 The term ‘niche’ throughout this report refers to the two ‘niches’ originally identified in Glyn Taylor & Elizabeth Assefa’s ‘External Evaluation of the Start Fund Progress, Performance & Future Plans’: “1: The ability to complement other funding mechanisms and funding streams by virtue of being faster to act, and 2: Its specific intent to deliver funding to under-served/neglected emergencies.” The MERF, which is based on the Start Fund model, experiences similar tensions.
SECTION 2: INTRODUCTION TO MERF AND THE START NETWORK CONTEXT
The Migration Emergency Response Fund (MERF) is one of various Start Network financing facilities. It is a rapid response, short term, context-specific contingency fund managed and operated in a collaborative governance approach by the Start Network, the donor, and its 24 ‘member’ NGOs - who are themselves a selection of the over 40 NGOs that currently form the Start Network.

Unlike the Start Fund\(^3\) open to all Start Network members responding to small to medium scale humanitarian crises globally, the MERF is a specialised fund dedicated to migration-related humanitarian emergencies only. In the MERF fund’s two iterations, which for ease will be referred to as MERF 1 (January 2017 – November 2017) and MERF 2 (July 2018 – December 2020), it operated with various geographical restrictions and under a slightly different rule regime when compared to the Start Fund. In essence, MERF was modelled to closely replicate the Start Fund mechanism which has been shown to be a successful, relevant and much used model of funding for Start Network members since its inception in 2014.

Not only is the governance structure and operating processes of the Start Fund repeated in the MERF, but the Start Fund central aim is echoed in the MERF fund, except with the special focus on migration-related situations and additional focus on sudden spikes in need, new vulnerable groups and systemic gaps. Overall, both funds have similar objectives: i.e. to provide rapid financing to underfunded small to medium scale crises, spikes in chronic humanitarian crises, and to act in anticipation of impending crises, filling a critical gap in humanitarian financing.

The UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) is one of the Start Fund’s six core donors, and through DFID’s Department of Migration and Modern Slavery it has been the sole donor financing MERF since late 2016. To date their contributions for MERF total approximately £7 million. DFID has not only funded MERF 1 and 2, but also earlier versions of movement-focused responses operated by Start Network. These were both phases of the European Refugee Response (ERR) which disbursed £21 million at the height of the European migrants or refugee ‘crisis’ in late 2015 and through 2016.

More specifically, the funding for MERF 2 has been linked to and made possible by a wider response by DFID to the issues and needs of the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) used by migrants and refugees. MERF 2 is therefore part of an NGO consortium implementing DFID’s Safety, Support and Solutions Phase 2 programme (SSS 2) which includes Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) as well as wider business case partners including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the British Red Cross, UNICEF, and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). At present the SSS 2 programme looks set to close in early 2021 while MERF 2 is set to run to December 2020. There are currently no pipeline funds to maintain MERF into 2021 and according to Start Network senior staff, no resource mobilisation has taken place or is currently planned to maintain MERF 2 after the end of the current phase. This could change, however, dependent on the findings and recommendations of this research report.

At the same time, the Start Network is currently exploring an ambitious change agenda - attempting to further innovate and expand its work. There are strong signs that Start Network’s financial facilities will continue to be popular to its members and to donors as offering effective and important mechanisms of humanitarian funding that complement other existing, but less agile and less rapid, forms of emergency funding. Start Network is considering and preparing for - if the conditions permit – potentially significant growth and restructuring in the next few years.

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3 Although still restricted to DAC-identified ODA recipient countries, meaning - for example - it cannot be used in most of Europe.
SECTION 3: 
SETTING THE SCENE: FUNDS, EMERGENCIES, START NETWORK’S INTERVENTIONS AND THE CHALLENGES OF MIGRATION RESPONSE
This section will set the scene and introduce important contextual issues. It will look at all migration related interventions by the Start Fund and MERF during the relevant period, the emergency response funding environment for migration crises, contemporary migration-related emergencies and the problematic of responding to these kinds of crises.

### 3.1 - INTERVENTIONS SUPPORTED BY THE START FUND AND MERF (1 & 2) BETWEEN JANUARY 2017 AND MAY 2020

Since 2017, the Migration Emergency Response Fund (Phases I & 2), along with a small number of migration-related Start Fund disbursements, have responded to 36 alerts, of which 6 were Collaborative Information Collection and Analysis projects (CICA), across 15 countries in four regions – South America, Europe, Africa and the Middle East. It has disbursed almost £4 million through its members. The smallest project in terms of cost was recently approved for £23,000 for a multi-country research project, while the largest was for over £510,000 for food, WASH, protection, and psychosocial needs for asylum seekers and migrants in Serbia during MERF 1 in 2017.

In order to provide a comparative analysis with migration responses in the Start Fund, Ravenstone also reviewed six recent mixed migration-related alerts raised in the Start Fund between 2018-2020. These alerts span five countries amounting to over £1.4 million disbursed. A full table of alerts, allocations, project action, disbursements and members involved is presented in Annex E. The table below offers a summary.

#### TABLE 3.1 – SUMMARY OF MIGRATION-RELATED PROJECTS FUNDED BY THE START NETWORK JANUARY 2017–MAY 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total number of alerts and CICAs activated</th>
<th>Total number of alerts not activated</th>
<th>Countries where alerts and CICAs were activated</th>
<th>Countries where alerts and CICAs were not activated</th>
<th>Total amount disbursed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MERF 1 (2017)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bulgaria, Libya x 2, Morocco, Niger, Serbia x 4</td>
<td>Bulgaria, Libya, Niger x 2, Serbia x 2,</td>
<td>£1,961,547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start Fund (2018/19)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Ecuador, Guatemala, Iraq, Mexico, Peru (2)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>£1,423,338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(mixed migration related projects only)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>25, of which 6 were through the Start Fund</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>£5,279,319</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2 - MERF AND THE START FUND IN THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION-RELATED HUMANITARIAN FUNDING AND POOLED FUNDING MECHANISMS

The Start Network’s engagement with refugees and migrants through the longer-term European Refugee Responses (ERR) from October 2015- August 2016 was a precursor to their involvement with mixed migration flows through the Start Fund and MERF. MERF and the Start Fund operate in, and grew out of a wider humanitarian context that has, for some years, recognised its own limitations and inefficiencies and which it has sought to address through reform.

The latest iteration of a voluntary, systematic reform of the humanitarian sector is the Grand Bargain process that started in 2016. The 61 signatories (agencies and donors) of the Grand Bargain currently represent 73 per cent of all humanitarian contributions donated in 2018 and together they account for 70 per cent of aid received by agencies.4

The Grand Bargain process is emblematic of new efforts, inter alia, to make humanitarian operations and funding more transparent, localised, efficient, participatory, and increase collaborative multi-year planning and funding while reducing the earmarking of donor contributions. The Start Network’s three main ambitions (to provide new forms of financing, increase localisation and enhance collective innovation) echo these wider efforts and MERF and the Start Fund have emerged as examples of new innovative finance.

While the Start Fund is pooled funding and migration sensitive, MERF is migration specific and offers funds (until the allocation decision is made) dedicated to humanitarian response in the migration context.5 But it is not alone: there are various migration-sensitive and migration-specific funding mechanisms that deserve a brief mention to contextualise this MERF research report.

The following list highlights the main initiatives, agencies and mechanisms that have been involved in migration or displacement-related emergency response and humanitarian support and / or funding. Each have their own characteristics and may not be directly comparable to the MERF or the Start Fund but they illustrate the scope of the sub-sector.6 A short elaboration for each is presented in Annex C, also mentioning their relevance to migration and displacement.

- United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)
- UN OCHA's Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPF)
- The European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF)
- IOM's Migration Emergency Funding Mechanism (MEFM)
- IFRC's Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF)

The aim of emergency response funds (ERFs) such as those highlighted above as well as MERF and the Start Fund, is clearly to provide rapid and flexible funding to in-country actors (mainly INGOs and the UN) to address sudden onset and sometimes anticipated humanitarian needs. Pooled, unearmarked contributions

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4 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (on line). Origin and concept of the Grand Bargain.
5 A migration sensitive fund would be sensitive to humanitarian emergencies related to mixed migration and include those situations in its range of potential funding allocations. A migration specific fund only offers support to migration related humanitarian emergencies.
6 For example, the Start Fund/MERF mechanisms may be more accessible to INGOs than others – a perspective the research will test.
are the lifeblood of ERFs and the current popularity of these funds as a means of channelling humanitarian aid has increased over the past years amongst government and non-government donors. Notwithstanding other factors that might mitigate this growth, this trend looks set to continue.

While the Start Fund operates in a manner similar to other ERFs, MERF is a migration specific fund and in its latest iteration since mid-2018 restricted to 11 pre-identified countries in North, West, and Central Africa.

In addition to setting MERF and the Start Fund within the context of humanitarian funding and emergency response funds, it is important to set Start Network’s initiatives and mechanisms within the wider story of contemporary mixed migration emergencies.

Humanitarian emergencies frequently involve and affect people who have been forcibly displaced internally or internationally by natural disaster or man-made crises, but some are specifically related to people on the move in mixed migratory flows. These are the humanitarian emergencies of relevance to this research, to MERF, and to migration-related projects funded by the Start Fund.

To set the scene in which MERF and migration-specific Start Fund projects operated between 2017-2020 the paragraphs below offers a highlight of mixed migration related situations related to the geographical scope of MERF 1 and 2, that could be considered humanitarian emergencies where people on the move have a high degree of vulnerability, protection deficits and unmet needs for essential services and provisions. These examples are elaborated in more detail in Annex B which includes additional regions and with extensive literature referencing.

AFRICA AND YEMEN

During this period different emergencies emerged involving those on mixed migratory routes from West Africa and the Horn towards north Africa (to Europe) and/or Yemen (to Saudi Arabia). Significant numbers of so-called economic migrants, asylum seekers and refugees practicing secondary movement and other displaced in Africa were caught up in highly precarious humanitarian and protection situations caused by conflict in transit countries (Libya, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso), predatory exploitation and violations (Libya / Yemen), harsh crack downs on irregular migration with expulsions and deportations (Morocco, Algeria, Niger, Saudi Arabia). Evidence and fears of the spread of COVID-19 in refugee camps and elsewhere prompted emergency responses to various mixed migration settings in Africa from March 2020 onwards in an attempt to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

EUROPE

Despite the significant fall in volume in the 2018-2020 period compared to the 2015-2017 period, mixed migratory flows continued to try to access Europe through the Eastern routes (from Syria through Turkey, and from Central Asia through Turkey) and the Central routes across the Mediterranean. The result of these continued movements in an increasingly restrictive political context was a range of humanitarian emergencies for migrants and asylum seekers, in countries from the Balkans to Italy and Greece. The proportion of deaths of migrants and asylum seekers in the Mediterranean spiked significantly in this period representing an unaddressed humanitarian tragedy as the EU not only removed and restricted rescue efforts but actively supported those preventing them from leaving Libyan or Turkish territorial waters. Prolonged detention in unacceptable conditions also created specific humanitarian and human rights emergencies in Greece.

Overall, between 2017 and the present, irregular migration and forced migration - often together in mixed flows - continued to dominate headlines and political space as it had in the years immediately preceding it, particularly during the European ‘migrant crisis’ (2014-2016). It continued to be most polemical in Europe, North America, parts of Asia
and Australia. The period saw a normalisation of measures and strategies to suppress and curtail these movements that would have previously been considered extreme, morally and even legally questionable, and politically unacceptable.

There were dozens of flash points and prolonged situations of hardship and suffering for those on the move globally, many of which could not be classified as humanitarian emergencies but instead a crisis of human rights and a crisis of compassion or empathy. However, some were clearly identifiable as humanitarian emergencies demanding rapid responses. Those who were able to respond were able to call on dedicated funding mechanisms – often emergency response funds – of which the Start Fund and MERF were included.

3.4 - RESPONDING TO MIXED MIGRATION

Common to many of the contexts outlined above are the complex overlaps of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding needs and agendas. While emergency peaks occur, the underlying issues driving migration are often chronic and as such result in protracted or cyclical movements.

Responding to mixed migration requires actors to rethink their approaches and tools, and one single approach is rarely sufficient. In this, there is much to be learnt from so-called ‘nexus’ thinking – joined-up responses drawing on humanitarian, development and peacebuilding approaches with, ideally, an ability to flex up/down the proportions of each according to context and change. In doing so, humanitarian principles should be central to decision-making, and one actor can rarely – and in many contexts should not – attempt to do all three.

In describing the funding challenges of responding to mixed migration, feedback in interviews and to the online survey reflected many of the same tensions and contradictions faced by practitioners in contexts of protracted forced displacement, both internal and transnational. These are contexts of chronic needs, but resulting from crises of protection and rights where assistance alone can rarely address the underlying causes and drivers. Target populations are typically not visible and dispersed into urban settings, unlike more ‘traditional’ forced displacement contexts where vulnerable populations may be grouped in camps or informal settlements. The question of ‘host’ communities and their own vulnerabilities, particularly in urban settings, can become more challenging, impacting on maintaining social cohesion between groups.

Funding sources in these contexts tend to reflect the silos of humanitarian or development mandates and budgets. The scale of needs may no longer be sufficient to deploy full humanitarian response architecture, or country contexts – such as in middle income countries – may be seen as not requiring external support, yet the humanitarian target population typically falls through the cracks of development and/or government programmes. While in many humanitarian crises the broader response system effectively acts as a safety net to the most vulnerable individuals, in more stable contexts or contexts where humanitarian agencies have moved on post-crisis this role falls

As defined by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), and adopted by MERF, “mixed migration refers to cross-border movements of people including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people in mixed flows have different legal statuses as well as a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Those in mixed migration flows travel along similar routes, using similar means of travel - often travelling irregularly and wholly or partially assisted by migrant smugglers.”

1 http://www.mixedmigration.org/about/
to governments or local civil society who may not have the capacity or the inclination to support vulnerable migrant populations. Uncertain legal status of many migrants heightens the risk that they fall through the gaps.

This then is the operational environment into which MERF 2 was deployed, and to a lesser extent MERF 1 and ERR given the absence of broader humanitarian aid architecture in Eastern Europe. Increasingly referred to as the ‘nexus’ approach, both in terms of conceptualising needs and coordinating operational responses amongst diverse mandates, such a lens poses both challenges and opportunities in mixed migration contexts. The tensions arising from this form a common thread throughout this report. To explore the issue of effective response to mixed migration through a nexus programming approach is beyond the scope of this study. However, in our reflection of the inputs of participants and the analysis undertaken we have attempted to break down these tensions as they impacted upon the achievements of MERF 2 in particular. We have also sought to frame our recommendations with this in mind.
SECTION 4:
RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY
The Start Network commissioned this research piece to “capture the learning from the implementation of mixed migration responses through three Start Network programmes (the Migration Emergency Response Fund, the European Refugee Response, and Start Fund). The findings and recommendations from this assignment will feed into a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges of running an NGO-driven, context specific, rapid response contingency fund” (see full Terms of Reference in Annex A).

The initial framework was therefore very open, allowing the researchers to explore and focus upon themes as they emerged rather than try and anticipate specific areas of focus at the risk of influencing findings. The researchers worked with the MERF team to develop initial research questions using the four standard evaluation areas of effectiveness, impact, relevance and coherence. Throughout the study, questions have sought to specifically consider project, context and strategic levels of analysis.

The findings of this research piece as well as the discussion and recommendations in sections 5 and 6 of this report, were informed by three strands of enquiry. These were (1) the literature review; (2) an online survey completed by 52 individuals in April 2020; and (3) semi-structured key informant interviews (KII) held with 29 people in May 2020.

Although the online survey results tended to emphasise project-level issues of functionality and efficiency, a considerable number of respondents included written comments to caveat their quantitative responses and highlight issues including tension, politicisation and ethics. As such, the KII questions focused on issues of impact and the challenges faced by practitioners, allowing the researchers to gain deeper insights into the strategic and context levels in particular.

Annex H offers a table showing how the methodology (below) and research tools have been used to elicit the findings and recommendations against the range of questions listed above.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

A robust review of both programme evaluations and documents, and wider relevant literature in the sector was conducted. Annexes B and C supplement section 3 of this report and illustrate the range of secondary sources used to understand the funding and the mixed migration sectors.

Beyond the use of secondary data to frame the funding context and historical narrative about mixed migration emergencies, this research included a close reading of documents generated by the Start Network. These include the MERF members’ September 2019 survey and records of member engagement as well as various reports, evaluations and strategy documents.


Understanding the Start Network’s change agenda has also been an important part of this research, helping Ravenstone to formulate recommendations coherent to Start Network’s vision and on-going developments. Documents reviewed for this purpose include: The Future of the Start Network, presentation
ON-LINE SURVEY

An on-line survey (available in French and English) was designed using Smartsurvey and sent out to approximately 190 individuals identified by the MERF team as potentially relevant to MERF and Start Fund migration-related projects in the last four years. In total 52 responses\(^8\) were received, yielding strong quantitative data to use as evidence in this research piece, both in its own right and for triangulation of findings through interviews and secondary sources. The implementation of the survey preceded the key informant interviews because the researchers expected some pressing issues, or concerns, expressed through the survey to inform and shape the qualitative enquiry of key informants. A copy of the main on-line survey is offered as Annex G.

It is worth noting that some of the 190 potential respondents were not in the same position that they were when they engaged with MERF or the Start Fund on migration alerts/awards. Moreover, some may not have felt it was relevant to fill in a survey relating to a project or process they engaged in years earlier. Consequently, while 52 respondents represent only 27% of those invited to respond, this actually represents significantly higher percentage of those who could realistically be expected to respond from the original list of potential respondents.

FIG. 4.1: PROFILES OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

\(^8\) Although 52 people responded to the survey, at least two individuals stated that they had held roles with more than one member agency or within a single member agency, thereby ticking different categories in their responses. As such, all % figures are therefore calculated against 100% of responses, rather than respondents, on the assumption that all responses are equally valid. When cross-tabulating responses, this has meant responses by these participants is counted twice (that is, against the two different positions held).
Apart from the 15% of respondents representing Start Network employees, almost all respondents were staff members of a MERF member agency with direct or indirect experience relating to MERF or the six projects funded under the Start Fund related to migration emergencies (see section 3.1 above). A greater number of staff based in HQ offices responded than those based in regional or country roles. Of those who responded to the on-line survey, 68% of the respondents were in regional or headquarter positions while 32% were in country or field positions within member agencies. 21 Member agencies were reflected, with some respondents mentioning they had held more than one position with the same agency, or had moved between agencies, during the 2017-2020 period.

**FIG. 4.2: WHERE WERE RESPONDENTS BASED WHEN RAISING ALERTS?**

![Pie chart showing regions where respondents were based](image)

When respondents raised alerts and/or were awarded funding almost half (45%) were engaged with the North Africa region, while 39% were engaged with the West Africa region, including Cameroon (Figure 2). Only 16% of the respondents were engaged with proposed projects in Europe (14% of total projects). These represent those who engaged with MERF funding under MERF 1, which had geographical coverage of primarily European countries with a few North African countries. In terms of when they engaged with MERF alerts and/or receiving funding awards most had recent engagement in 2019 and 2020 (64%) while the rest (36%) had engagement in 2017 and/or 2018.

**KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KII)**

Immediately following the closing date of the survey, Ravenstone conducted in-depth interviews with individuals from Start Network member agencies as well as Start Network staff, including Start Network’s CEO. Forty-six individuals with direct engagement or close knowledge of both the Start Fund and MERF were identified by Start Network staff and member agency staff; 29 of these participated in 45-60 minute interviews conducted by Skype, Zoom, or telephone during the first half of May 2020.
Interviewees included a mixture of headquarter or regional level and field level staff representing 14 member agencies as well as two key staff members of DFID and 7 Start Network staff members (see Fig. 3).  

A copy of the semi-structured interview questions used to guide the KII process is offered as Annex D.

KIIs were conducted by different members of the Ravenstone team to accommodate language preferences of the interviewees. The interviews were conducted informally but guided by a semi-structured interview format based on the areas of questions previously identified and agreed with Start during the inception period. The KIIIs are all documented, with key issues and, where relevant, useful quotes from the respondents recorded. As interviewees spoke with an understanding that the conversation was anonymous, summary interview notes can be made available to the Start Network at the end of the assignment, but the identity of the interviewees will be removed.

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Fig. 4.3: Profiles of KII Participants

- Start Network staff: 24%
- Start Network / MERF Member agencies (from 14 different NGOs): 66%
- Donor: 7%
- Local NGO / implementing partner: 3%

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*This includes an interview with the INGO Consortium Coordination Unit to which MERF 2 is formally attached, in Tunis.*
STUDY LIMITATIONS

IMPLICATIONS OF COVID–19 PANDEMIC FOR THE STUDY

Initially, it was not clear to what extent COVID-19 would delay the research as people adjusted to the changes in behaviour and the global lockdown took hold. The UK government ‘lock-down’ started on March 23rd for an indefinite period, and all travel and field trips became impossible. Additionally, as the Start Network and many member agencies attempted to respond to the health emergency, many key staff were intensely occupied with COVID-related issues and understandably their participation in this research was not their highest priority.

Although COVID-19 delayed some of the initial aspects of this research, Ravenstone was able to catch up and the envisaged delay to finalising the research was avoided.

RESEARCH AND SURVEY FATIGUE

It was apparent that member agencies and other interlocutors contacted for this research have been invited to participate in various Start Network surveys and research efforts in recent years. Even during this research another Start study was underway contacting many of the same agencies and some of the same individuals. Nevertheless, as the relatively high number of survey respondents and KIIs illustrate, these obstacles were overcome as all communication and research took place through electronic and digital means. Possible survey ‘fatigue’ from a relatively high number of recent evaluations and member survey activities within the network as well as regular unavailability that researchers often encounter did not prevent high representation of relevant interlocutors for the research.

RESEARCH BIASES

Ravenstone, in discussion with MERF staff, identified some biases that needed to be overcome. These included:

1. Bigger agencies have greater capacity to respond, and may be over-represented
2. HQ staff may have more capacity to respond than field based staff, and may be over-represented skewing findings towards HQ level issues.
3. People who have had specific problems are often more motivated to express them and may be over-represented in the survey and KIIs, skewing findings towards negative experiences.
4. People working in current emergencies may be less able to respond than those working in more stable countries, which risks skewing the bias towards past projects rather than current projects.

Ravenstone considers these potential biases were overcome through selective targeting and believes the findings represent a balanced assessment of member agencies’ views. Indeed, 21 of the 26 member agencies who engaged with MERF 1 or/and 2 were represented in the survey, which suggests extremely strong engagement amongst members. Although the inclusion of Start Network staff in the on-line survey and KII could be seen as compromising the objectiveness of the findings, they only represented 11.5% (6 individuals of 52) of the survey respondents. In terms of the KIIs, Start employees represented 24% of the total, which is relatively high, but unlike the survey, during the interviews the researchers could select what issues were relevant to the research and applied editorial judgement on interview findings from Start employees.

SEQUENCING OF RESEARCH

Conducting the survey before the KIIIs meant that the researchers were able to design a survey in an unbiased manner, covering a wide range of issues around issues of effectiveness, impact, relevance and coherence. The findings of the survey and more specifically the comments included in the comment boxes in the survey results were then used to provide important direction for the semi-structured interviews. Following quite uniform (and positive) responses in the survey in terms of the functionality and operations (project level) of MERF meant that the KIIIs could focus on more existential and principled aspects of the inquiry (context and strategic level) – subjects on which many interviewees had much to say.
SECTION 5: RESEARCH FINDINGS
This section presents key findings informed by the desk research along with 29 key informant interviews and 52 responses to the on-line survey. Findings are grouped according to the main research themes of effectiveness, impact, coherence, and relevance, but are introduced with some important general findings. The issues raised in the content throughout this section arose as the most salient discussion points during the interviews and from the online survey. They have also been identified by the researchers the most relevant for the Start Network, as it explores and develops its current change agenda.

5.1 GENERAL FINDINGS

FINDING 1: START NETWORK OFFERS HIGHLY VALUED CONTINGENCY FUNDS

Feedback on the Start Fund generally (not related to mixed migration responses) was universally positive, with many respondents describing it with superlatives. It was described as a 'beautiful model' for funding, and most people spoke of the Start Fund mechanism as a very positive innovation and as a model very well-suited to its aims, combining high speed with agility and a much-valued light-touch in terms of gaining project approval and reporting requirements. All its business is conducted collaboratively between member agencies and the Start Network with transparency and access to shared documents high.

“MERF, AND START IN GENERAL, OFFER A HIGHLY TRANSPARENT PROCESS AND IT IS ALSO HIGHLY COLLABORATIVE WHICH HELPS BREAK DOWN BARRIERS BETWEEN AGENCIES AS YOU MUST COLLABORATE ON RAISING ALERTS, SUBMITTING PROPOSALS, AND SELECTING PROPOSALS. THIS IS A HUGE ADDED VALUE FOR THE SECTOR.” (ONLINE SURVEY RESPONDENT)

“THERE MAY BE SOME TIMES WHERE THE COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS CAN APPEAR TO BE A FORM OF COLLUSION BUT IT’S A BENIGN FORM OF COLLUSION AND AT BEST THE START FUND WORKS EXTREMELY WELL.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

The Start Fund appears to be a much-used and much-valued fund by the member agencies interviewed, who have between them utilised almost £46 million in the last 3.5 years (not including MERF funding). Many respondents also spoke highly of the new Start Fund COVID-19 activated in April 2020 and which many were currently raising alerts against and/or implementing projects with.

FINDING 2: START NETWORK’S SPECIALISED FUND FOR MIGRATION IS A SOURCE OF SOME STRATEGIC TENSION

Much of the feedback on MERF reflected wider debates around where mixed migration sits within the aid spectrum ("nexus"), how to break down aid silos, and the risks of politicisation of humanitarian response.

“MIGRATION IS A CRITICAL ISSUE AND HIGHLY SIGNIFICANT AND ONE THAT WARRANTS SPECIAL FOCUS AND A SPECIAL FUND WITH SPECIAL EXPERTISE.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

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10 Both Start Fund Covid-19 and MERF are, in terms of structural design and governance, based on the successful Start Fund model. At the core of the model is trust – between the donors and the member agencies that form the Start Network, between the donors and the Start Network and between the Start Network and its members. The researchers assume this trust is possible because of years of professionalisation in INGOs members with rising standards of accountability and compliance, often demanded by the donors. A number of agency representatives confirmed this during interviews. Some of the six core Start Network donors and especially DFID deal directly with many of the predominantly UK-based member agencies and have established close working relationships. Without these existing relationships it is hard to see how donors would trust the Start Network to offer such rapid disbursal of funds and have such low reporting requirements and onerous administration associated with grants.
Opinions of those interviewed ranged from moderately positive to negative. Members working with refugees and migrants and those who have been successful with their alerts appreciated MERF 2 more, but others were more sceptical. Some of those interviewed were very positive about the idea of MERF insofar that it was a financing facility similar to the Start Fund, but felt that in practice MERF 2 had significant drawbacks. As discussed in the sections below, some of the more concrete issues arising included the geographical limitations of MERF 2, the fact that unlike MERF 1 and ERR it did not suit mixed migration-related needs on the ground, and that DFID were present in the allocation committee meetings with (unused to date) veto powers affecting the balance of powers.

“MERF’S WINGS WERE CLIPPED FROM THE START BY ITS ASSOCIATION WITH DFID, THE GEOGRAPHICAL LIMITATIONS AND LACK OF DISTINCTION FROM START FUND.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

As can be seen from the table in Annex E, members raised 14 alerts under MERF 2, four of which were declined by allocation committees and 10 of which received awards. Of these ten awards, 4 were low-disbursement Collaborative Information Collection and Analysis (CICA) research projects, meaning just six project interventions have taken place to date under MERF 2. Some of those interviewed, including Start and DFID interviewees, suggested this points to a poor use of MERF by members.

Indeed, there was a lengthy hiatus - with no alerts arising - of more than seven months between August 2019 and March 2020 except for a CICA in December 2019 for Mali. Even the two successful alerts in March and April 2020 are COVID-related rather than alerts for emergencies arising from migratory conditions themselves; however, COVID-19 is in itself an ‘unforeseen need’ and therefore also fulfils a condition that can trigger MERF allocations. Although this may be regarded as evidence of underuse of MERF 2, Start staff felt that disbursements of MERF 2 funds are overall in-line with their planned target/indicator of 10 alerts overall for the fund.

Nevertheless, an evident tension exists between MERF 2 and member agencies in terms of the relevance and appropriateness of MERF 2 in the geographical context it was confined to. Specific tensions and other findings are further explored below.
5.2 - EFFECTIVENESS

MERF was assessed to be an effective mechanism by most who participated in the research. As the tables and discussion below illustrates there were high levels of satisfaction by member agencies relating to the effective structure and operational aspects of MERF, although there were concerns about the governance and process aspects insofar that they included donor participation. Survey responses on the whole tended to be more positive, which is likely due to the format of the questions as opposed to the semi-structured interviews. 78% (37 of 48) of MERF survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that MERF has been fit for purpose and functionally competent, as shown in table 5.1 below. This overall trend was not particularly affected by Start Network staff respondents, as per the below tables.

**TABLE 5.1 - FIT FOR PURPOSE?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Respondents</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>9 (19%)</td>
<td>18 (38%)</td>
<td>19 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Without Start Network Employees</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
<td>6 (15%)</td>
<td>17 (43%)</td>
<td>15 (38%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FINDING 3: REGIONAL PRESENCE AND CLOSE COLLABORATION WITH MERF AT FIELD LEVEL ARE HIGHLY VALUED BY MEMBERS, BRINGING UNANTICIPATED BENEFITS IN COORDINATION IN PARTICULAR, BUT THE POTENTIAL FOR COLLECTIVE ADVOCACY BY MEMBERS IS NOT FULLY EXPLOITED**

From member agencies and external partners there was universal appreciation for MERF’s regional presence in Tunis, the MERF team’s proactive outreach and approachability, and the building up of migration- and region-specific expertise. Many of those interviewed argued that going forward, this capacity needs to be retained within Start Network regardless of the form it takes, suggesting that on-the-ground presence and engagement would be a popular and effective aspect of Start modus operandi in the future and could enhance Starts success.

> "THE MERF TEAM WAS VERY RESPONSIVE, KNOWLEDGEABLE, AND PASSIONATE ABOUT THE LOCATIONS AFFECTED AND AS SUCH WERE POWERFUL, GIVING GREAT ADVICE AND SOMETIMES SUGGESTING WHERE TO RAISE ALERTS.”

(INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

Many interview respondents highlighted the proactive support received from the MERF regional presence, and their efforts made to promote the MERF amongst member agencies working across the 11 MERF countries. Similarly, an impressive 95% (40 of 42 respondents) of non-Start employees responding to the MERF survey were very positive (agree or strongly agree) about interactions with the MERF team (Table 5.3).

**TABLE 5.2  SUPPORTING AND ENGAGED STAFF? (RESULTS WITHOUT START STAFF RESPONDENTS)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MERF's templates, handbook rules, timelines, guidance notes are user friendly</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3 (7%)</td>
<td>5 (12%)</td>
<td>21 (50%)</td>
<td>11 (26%)</td>
<td>2 (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This analysis included two local NGO partners who typically had less direct contact on which to base their decision. There was universal support from field-based respondents for the regional presence in Tunis for MERF 2, pointing to the added value of a contextually and thematically experienced team. In Tunisia specifically, where no international humanitarian architecture in terms of UN leadership and sector clusters is in place, the MERF prompted NGO members to initiate their own in-country coordination mechanism, helping establish common analysis and narrative in terms of context and mixed migration needs. Initially focusing on issues of mixed migration, this particular example became a de facto INGO coordination structure more generally.

One interview respondent spoke of the MERF Coordinator’s efforts to promote collective advocacy in the region through the drafting of a briefing note with a view to proactive lobbying external stakeholders, based on member inputs. Broader analysis in terms of MERF’s support to collective advocacy suggests this potential remains relatively unexploited. KII responses on the issue of coordination and advocacy reflected the relatively mixed responses of the survey, summarised below (Table 5.5).

**TABLE 5.4 OPERATIONAL RESPONSE OR COMMON ADVOCACY? (ALL RESPONDENTS)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coordination: MERF has brought agencies together for the purposes of operational response or common advocacy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
<td>11 (23%)</td>
<td>14 (29%)</td>
<td>15 (31%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents also appreciated that funding was overseen by operational actors – a fund run by practitioners, for practitioners. A small number praised the consortia structure and regional hub specifically as a means of ensuring fair judgement and greater independence in the allocation process.

“**MERF IS AN OPERATOR, MADE UP OF OPERATIONAL ACTORS, APPLYING CERTAIN PRINCIPLES AND LAWS, AND ALLOWS TARGETING AGAINST NEEDS NOT STATUS. FROM MERF WE NEVER HAD A QUESTION AROUND LEGAL STATUS, NOR A REQUEST FOR DATA ON BENEFICIARIES’ STATUS.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)**

**FINDING 4: CONTEXTUAL AND/OR MIGRATION KNOWLEDGE AMONGST MEMBERS INVOLVED IN ALLOCATION PROCESSES IS CONSIDERED AS A FUNDAMENTAL REQUIREMENT AMONGST MEMBERS**

While appreciative of the independence MERF brings, a number of respondents questioned the relevance of the Start Fund’s allocation committee approach being applied to MERF. Survey feedback remained overall positive with regard to the functionality of the alert and allocation process but saw a relatively higher level of negative responses than elsewhere in the survey (Table 5.6)
Strongly disagree  Disagree  Neutral  Agree  Strongly Agree  Don’t know  Total
Raising an alert through MERF was easy and straight-forward  0 (0%)  3 (6%)  3 (6%)  20 (42%)  15 (31%)  7 (15%)  48
The fund allocation decision process was straight-forward  0 (0%)  5 (10%)  6 (13%)  12 (25%)  20 (42%)  5 (10%)  48

Interviews subsequently highlighted the difficulties of how to make sure people making decisions have a strong understanding of the context, while also ensuring objectivity and impartiality. Multiple respondents both in Tunisia and at the headquarters levels gave the same example of an alert in Southern Tunisia which was declined and did not receive funding. The members involved felt wider gaps in humanitarian coordination in Tunisia (no cluster or humanitarian country team meetings, for example) resulted in a general lack of transparency and consensus on data, particularly between UN and INGO actors.

“MERF PROJECT REVIEW PROCESSES ARE NOT ALWAYS ADAPTED – MEMBER AGENCIES JUDGING PROPOSALS IN CONTEXTS AND THEMATICS THEY ARE NOT FAMILIAR WITH, WHICH AT TIMES MEANT THE DECISION PROCESS RESTED SOLELY ON DFID AS THE ONLY PANEL MEMBER PRESENT AT FIELD LEVEL AND WITH ANY CONTEXTUAL AND/OR THEMATIC EXPERTISE.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

UN presence in the South of Tunisia was felt to have shaped DFID’s understanding of the needs presented in the alert, and a CICA linked to the same alert was not able to solicit concrete figures from the UN agencies present either. DFID’s involvement in the panel was felt to have heavily influenced the outcome as the UK-based HQ participants who did not have any field presence in the region deferred to DFID’s field presence.

“MERF MEMBERS ARE ON THE ALLOCATION COMMITTEE BUT HAVE ZERO PRESENCE IN THE MAGHREB, SO WHAT DO THEY BASE THEIR DECISIONS ON? WE COULD INVOLVE EXTERNAL ACTORS – SUCH AS EU FOCAL POINTS – WITHIN THE COUNTRIES INSTEAD.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

However, as interview respondents also pointed out, there are very few wider Start Network members active in Tunisia (and Morocco) despite the predominance of these members in the allocation process. A small number wondered whether only agencies with migration expertise should be able to access and allocate MERF funds. This echoed findings in the 2017 Start Fund evaluation which stated “in terms of the makeup of the rota for any given alert, one committee member noted that the balance of members with experience in context versus those with no contextual knowledge was a challenging topic”. This is likely to be even more so when funding is focusing on a specific thematic, such as mixed migration as it is in MERF.
FINDING 5: START FUND IS A RECOGNIZED BRAND, PARTICULARLY AMONGST MEMBERS WITH STRONG UK PRESENCE. MERF DID NOT ALWAYS BENEFIT FROM THIS BRAND FAMILIARITY AND LOWER LEVELS OF FAMILIARITY AMONGST FIELD ACTORS IN PRIMARILY FRANCOPHONE MERF 2 REGIONS MAY HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO A LOWER UPTAKE AMONGST MEMBERS. OUTREACH REQUIRED SUBSTANTIAL INVESTMENTS INCLUDING PHYSICAL VISITS TO COUNTRIES AND AGENCIES FROM THE REGIONAL MERF TEAM

All INGOs involved with MERF 2 were Start Network members except for the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), which was able to access MERF due to its role as a consortium partner under SSS2. However, levels of familiarity with Start Network in general and with MERF specifically varied considerably between respondents. Agencies with a smaller UK presence - such as France and US-based INGOs - were less familiar with Start Network and MERF and felt this could be an obstacle at times. Mercy Corps in Niger for example, approached the MERF after a meeting with UNHCR in-country prompted them to consult with their US-based HQ around funding options. The HQ then redirected the country team onto Mercy Corps UK colleagues with a view to accessing MERF.

This wider lack of awareness of the Start Network may also have impacted on expectations of what MERF could offer at field level. Some believed the distinction between the Start Fund and MERF was made precisely to be able to go beyond Start Fund’s humanitarian focus, with migration as the entry point. Most respondents in the North Africa region had not used the Start Fund in any other context.

“START [FUND] IS CLEARLY EMERGENCY - MERF AND MIGRANT NEEDS ARE NOT ACUTE, THEY ARE CHRONIC.” (ONLINE SURVEY RESPONDENT)

Some interviewees complained that as the MERF 2 rules (around alerts and length of interventions etc) and restrictions (geographical) differ from both MERF 1 and Start Fund, it created confusion resulting in fewer people understanding or using MERF. Various respondents mentioned that while these differences were understood at the headquarters level, they often struggled to convince their field offices to learn more about MERF as a viable funding alternative.

“THE DIVISION OF LABOUR BETWEEN MERF AND START FUND WAS NOT MADE CLEAR TO MEMBERS. THIS LED TO SOME CONFUSION AND CONTRIBUTED TO THE REASON MERF WAS NOT SUCCESSFUL. MERF’S NICHE AS DISTINCT FROM START [FUND] WAS NOT PROPERLY CARVED OUT CLEARLY ENOUGH.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

“MERF IS A CLASSIC EXAMPLE OF TRYING TO REPLICATE THE VIRTUES OF START IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS AND SITUATIONS. THE ORIGIN OF MERF WAS “LOGICAL” BECAUSE THE START FUND HAD PROVED TO BE SO SUCCESSFUL BUT PERHAPS MIGRATION DOESN’T LEND ITSELF SO WELL TO SHORT TERM INTERVENTIONS.” (INTERVIEW, START NETWORK)
FINDING 6: ENGLISH AS THE SOLE WORKING LANGUAGE CAN BE AN IMPEDIMENT FOR INGO MEMBERS AND LOCAL PARTNERS ALIKE – WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR INFORMED DECISION-MAKING

While not addressed in the survey, the question of the perception of Start Network being a British humanitarian network arose repeatedly in feedback from respondents using the MERF. Of the 11 countries covered under MERF 2, eight are francophone. This has implications for the member agencies on the ground as well as local partners, as staff at field level (those initiating and drafting the bulk of alerts, proposals and reports) tend to be francophone. Interview respondents repeatedly referred to the requirement for proposals to be submitted in English. In the case of one local partner in Morocco, both the partner in question and the INGO member they worked with believed that this prevented them from participating in the preparation of the proposal itself. Moreover, if they had been invited, the language barrier would have prevented them from participation in any discussion around the alert even though they were well-positioned to provide detailed contextual insights into the reasons and justifications for the alert and response.

“THE INVOLVEMENT OF LOCAL NGOS IS IMPORTANT – ON THE RECOMMENDATION OF A MERF MEMBER (AND AFTER DEMONSTRATION COMPETENCY AND EXPERIENCE IN MIGRATION), LOCAL NGOS SHOULD BE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS.” (ONLINE SURVEY RESPONDENT)

This specific question of language was not directly included in the online survey (which was offered in English and French) and as such was raised specifically through subsequent KII s - particularly field staff working in francophone contexts or Francophone-based HQ staff.

“DISCUSSION WAS ALL DONE IN ENGLISH, SO IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE FOR US TO DEFEND THE PROJECT.” (INTERVIEW, LOCAL PARTNER)

INGO members, who on the whole had greater capacity to work with English, at times still struggled to have sufficient English-language capacity during the timeframes required. Submissions to MERF (submitted in the UK) by francophone agencies would typically be reviewed and edited by staff in members’ UK offices, which for francophone INGOs are often very small. Review and language editing of a proposal, particularly over a weekend, was not always easy to arrange.

FINDING 7: DONOR ENGAGEMENT WAS PERCEIVED BY MEMBERS TO COMPROMISE THE INGO IDENTITY OF START/MERF, IN PARTICULAR ITS PEER TO PEER COLLABORATION

No specific questions were included in the online survey with regard to DFID’s involvement in the oversight and implementation of MERF, and their potential veto in the allocation process. During key informant interviews however, the question of DFID’s close involvement was raised repeatedly. While almost all respondents – and those working in North Africa in particular – valued the principle of the MERF, the challenges raised in the South Tunisia review process discussed previously gives a good indication of member sentiment regarding DFID’s close involvement and active participation in the MERF processes.

“THAT DFID WERE INSIDE THESE MEETINGS WAS STRANGE AND CHANGED THE PEER TO PEER DYNAMIC.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)
The majority of INGO representatives interviewed felt there were inevitable political considerations behind DFID’s wider Safety, Support and Solutions Phase 2 programme and a number pointed to the risk that migration is already a polemical sector and that any migration response is quickly politicised. According to the DFID representatives themselves, DFID valued their direct involvement in the allocation committees but various respondents felt that DFID’s presence in meetings was an important and detrimental aspect of the difference between the Start Fund and MERF 2. Some felt DFID already had sufficient representation with Start and MERF through other fora and that despite the knowledge and expertise DFID representatives brought to their participation, it was not necessary or desirable that they sit on the allocation committees.

One interview respondent felt that DFID’s involvement had actually increased impartiality and encouraged INGO members to work transparently.

“OVER TIME A DEFINITE PERCEPTION HAS GROWN THAT DFID PRESENCE ON THE BOARD IS STRONG PRESENCE – BUT THIS HAS PERHAPS HELPED ADDRESS SOME OF THE ‘COPINAGE’ [CRONYISM] INFLUENCES IN DECISION MAKING ELSEWHERE”. (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

However, a larger number commented that INGOs had felt their choices in relation to MERF could impact their wider reputation and fundraising prospects, both in terms of their decision to submit or participate in an alert or in their subsequent involvement in an allocation process. A small number of member agency interview respondents referenced internal pressure in terms of maintaining reputation and being seen to participate, or to ensure the organisation’s proposal was supported in the project selection process rather than abstain or support another agency. A (different) small number of interview respondents also expressed concern that DFID might be using the MERF to shape their funding decisions outside the MERF, meaning that an INGO’s decision to submit an alert – or not – could have potential impacts on their bilateral funding relationships with DFID.

“INSTEAD OF BEING JUST OBSERVERS THEY WERE VERY CLEAR IN THEIR PREFERENCES AND AGENCIES WERE FEARFUL OF EXPRESSING ALTERNATIVE VIEWS BECAUSE MANY OF THE AGENCIES CONCERNED WERE ALSO APPLYING TO DFID FOR FINANCE.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

During the research, Start staff did not volunteer explicit concern relating to DFID’s involvement, but earlier evaluations of the Start Fund highlighted the importance of maintaining independence vis-à-vis donors. However, it is apparent that internally there has been some discussion in Start Network about the level of DFID’s involvement in allocation committees. The 2019 Evaluation ‘Preparedness for Growth’ quotes the Start Business Case which states that “being independent is meant to: (…); increase income and establish bilateral relationships with donors”. “Bilateral”, here, is understood to refer to a relationship between the two entities, rather than actually embedding the donor into a Start mechanism as was the case in MERF.
Discussions on impact typically came back to the tensions between the humanitarian parameters of MERF and the chronic nature of mixed migration needs in the region, with many respondents arguing for effectively a ‘two tier’ fund enabling both emergency response and longer-term responses to chronic needs. These chronic needs tended to be more closely linked to human rights than assistance per se, with assistance needs seen to be a consequence of wider human rights and/or political challenges. 83% (40 of 48) of survey respondents agreed that MERF has provided real humanitarian impact and saved lives, and when comparing responses against field or HQ staff, and against MERF and Start Fund for migration, survey data indicated a slightly clearer positive consensus around Start Fund than for MERF. For the MERF, a higher number of HQ respondents gave a neutral or even a negative response. Those who had been in field positions during their engagement with MERF were either in agreement or strongly in agreement with its humanitarian impact.

All 4 respondents who had used Start Fund, both field and HQ based, replied in the positive (Table 5.8):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FINDING 8: THE PRINCIPLE OF A DEDICATED MIGRATION FUND IS VALUED, BUT HUMANITARIAN PARAMETERS PROVED TO BE RESTRICTIVE FOR MERF 2 TO ACHIEVE IMPACT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Both interviews and multiple written comments made in the online survey indicate broad support for a dedicated, flexible migration fund in response in widespread acknowledgment of unmet needs. A number of interviewees also referred to the ‘huge potential’ of MERF as a flexible fund focusing on migration. However, no one suggested the Start Fund had been problematic in funding migration-related emergencies (see section 5.4, Coherence, for further discussion on the issue of Start or migration specific funding). However, interview findings also revealed a strong consensus that the humanitarian parameters of the MERF 2 were not well adapted to the actual migration context in North and West Africa. As such, MERF was rarely able to provide the sort of support required to address endemic or systemic longer-term issues of migration or to provide on-going relief to continual migration needs. As mentioned, practitioners suggested that in these regions on-going needs for protection and support to vulnerable migrants along certain routes and in particular locations were more typical than sudden emergencies.

Amongst member agency staff based in the region of North and West Africa (MERF I), in particular, there was almost universal support for the idea of MERF (understood by respondents as ‘a flexible, reactive fund
supporting responses to mixed migration’), but a general sense of disappointment from some in what the mechanism had actually been able to deliver - due to the particular needs mentioned above.

“SOMETIMES MERF FUNDS ARE THE SINGLE OPPORTUNITY AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT MIGRANT NEEDS IN SOME CONTEXTS.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

EXTRACT: FROM ALERT 18 MOROCCO (SPIKE IN NEED AND GAPS IN RESPONSE – 6 MONTH ALERT) THE MERF ALLOCATION COMMITTEE CONVENEED TODAY TO MAKE AN ALLOCATION DECISION FOR MERF ALERT 18 MOROCCO (SPIKE IN NEEDS AND GAPS IN RESPONSE). THE MERF COMMITTEE DECIDED NOT TO ALLOCATE £750,000 IN RESPONSE TO THIS CRISIS IN MOROCCO. THE COMMITTEE RECOGNISED THAT THERE WERE ONGOING HUMANITARIAN NEEDS FOR MIGRANTS AND A LACK OF FUNDING WITHIN MOROCCO. HOWEVER, IT WAS FELT THAT THIS HAD BECOME A CHRONIC ONGOING SITUATION AND THE MERF WAS NOT THE RIGHT MECHANISM TO RESPOND TO THIS CRISIS. ALTHOUGH THIS ALERT WAS NOT FRAMED AS A CONTINUATION OF THE PREVIOUS MERF ALERTS IN MOROCCO IT WAS FELT THAT IT WOULD BE.

One MERF 2 response in Niger (MERF Alert 19 Influx of Refugees) provides a rare, textbook example of a ‘traditional’ emergency spike: Mercy Corps, the implementing agency, pointed to the fact that ECHO’s country-based rapid response mechanism for Niger did not extend to their emergency location. As such, they argued that MERF was most relevant where other humanitarian funding is absent. This goes some way to explaining why no alerts were received from contexts with strong humanitarian presence (and funding), such as Mali.

Indeed, the majority of both alerts and allocations were generated by the North Africa region, where member agency staff and a local partner were unanimous in pointing to the nature of migration as a chronic rather than acute emergency, requiring more of a ‘nexus’ approach. That is not to say the MERF projects supported in the region were felt to be unjustified; the same respondents underlined the fact that MERF was the single source of funding available to them, enabling them to respond to specific needs. They all highlighted both the challenge of fundraising for a context that is not deemed to be ‘humanitarian’ and that of working in contexts where local civil society organisations carry the bulk of the social sector for local populations, with little capacity to go beyond that. Furthermore, with local partners not always having a culture of humanitarian protection, the approaches and roles of INGOs is necessarily very different to that in more active humanitarian contexts.

“TO UNDERSTAND MIGRATION – WE NEED TO HAVE GOOD CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OVER 2-3 YEARS, SCENARIOS ETC AND PICK OUT CIRCULAR HUMANITARIAN PEAKS OR CRISES, AND RATHER THAN EVALUATE INDIVIDUAL CRISIS SITUATIONS WE THEN EVALUATE THE IMPACT OF THESE PEAKS ON THE WIDER CONTEXT OVER TIME... AND RATHER THAN JUST RESPOND TO THE INDIVIDUAL PEAKS, WE ACTUALLY RESPOND TO THE IMPACTS OF THESE PEAKS ON THE UNDERLYING CONTEXT.” (INTERVIEW, LOCAL PARTNER)
There is a sense of ambivalence amongst the member agencies on this point. On one hand the idea of MERF and a migration-dedicated fund is valued, but due to the more chronic needs that migration emergencies can represent short term assistance around specific objectives may not be the best way to respond. This is only compounded when these needs arise in a context where few agencies are used to responding to short term emergencies.

“WE NEED TO ADD MORE NEXUS ASPECTS TO IT, THINK SOLUTIONS AND COORDINATE WITH DEVELOPMENT / PEACEBUILDING ACTORS. LOTS OF ISSUES IN THIS REGION ARE ABOUT SOCIAL COHESION, SUPPORT TO LOCAL ORGANISATIONS AS THE FRONTLINE SAFETY NET – WE DON’T HAVE LARGE SCALE EMERGENCIES OUTSIDE LIBYA, SO NO BIG DISPLACEMENT MOVEMENTS – INSTEAD WE NEED SMALLER, MORE RESILIENT COMMUNITIES’ APPROACHES.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

Instead, almost all field respondents pointed to the need for a dual-tier mechanism enabling, on the one hand, traditional Start Fund-style emergency funding to ‘peaks’ in humanitarian need and on the other hand, a slower process allowing agencies to engage with the consequences of migration over time in chronic or protracted contexts. Agencies working in Morocco and Tunisia pointed to high levels of mental health and psychosocial needs amongst migrants which could not be addressed through short-term MERF funds, but for which no other sources of funding existed. This tension is explored further in Sections 5.4 Coherence and 5.5 Relevance, below.

FINDING 9: STRICT PARAMETERS OF CRITERIA AND / OR BUDGET REQUIREMENTS MAY AT TIMES PREVENT RELEVANT INTERVENTIONS FROM TAKING PLACE: MERF 2 APPEARS TO BE CURIOUSLY INFLEXIBLE WITH REGARD TO SMALLER / CHRONIC OR ANTICIPATORY ACTIONS

If no one felt the existing MERF allocations had failed to meet needs, a large number of field-based interview respondents felt the budget parameters, an emphasis on rapid emergency response and MERF’s ‘error threshold’ had prevented effective responses at times. Multiple interview respondents and even online survey comments highlighted experiences in Southern Tunisia and Morocco where actions were seen to be valuable preventive, or anticipatory interventions being rejected.

“IT WAS A CRISIS FOR THE INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED (...) BUT IT’S NOT A MASSIVE MOBILISATION SO DOESN’T MEET MERF REQUIREMENTS. BUT THEN HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THESE ‘MINI-PEAKS’?” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

“TOO FEW PEOPLE SHOULDN’T BE A REASON NOT TO FUND IT - THERE WERE SCORES OF PEOPLE IN SOUTH TUNISIA - DFID FELT IT WAS INSUFFICIENT VALUE FOR MONEY. MERF SHOULD BE ABLE TO FOCUS ON NEED RATHER THAN BUDGET PARAMETERS AND VALUE FOR MONEY.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

This overall question of value for money and the risk threshold for smaller disbursements echoes a recommendation from the Start 2019 External Evaluation “Preparedness for Growth” which highlights that

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11 A number of interviewees raised the issue of whether any ‘bad’ allocations could be made in a context of chronic need, and whether it was relevant to emphasise issues of value for money, a certain threshold in terms of numbers of potential beneficiaries etc. over the likelihood that any intervention would have positive outcomes for those targeted, particularly when discussing low amounts of money.
“in combination with 72-hour decision-making and the 300K limit, the 45-day window is one element which enables donors to undertake ‘no regrets’ decision-making i.e. donors are more comfortable with delegated decision making because of the relatively small grant sizes”. It is unclear how far this ‘no regrets decision-making’ has been transferred to MERF, particularly for smaller budget requests, and whether DFID’s presence in the allocation panels in fact restricted this further.

“A SMALL AMOUNT OF FUNDING CAN GO A LONG WAY TO PROTECTING VULNERABLE REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS UNABLE TO ACCESS GOVERNMENT SUPPORT, PROVIDING BASIC NEEDS (FOOD AND NFI, HEALTH AND HYGIENE, PROTECTION SERVICES AND MENTAL HEALTH CARE). MERF CAN PROVIDE SMALL, EMERGENCY GRANTS AND GAP FUNDING THAT COULD REALLY HELP TO ALLEVIATE THE MOST BASIC NEEDS OF THIS POPULATION.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

The same study recommended a “simplification of decision making by applying an automatic and standard approval process for low-level allocation decisions as a default. Also, strengthen the regionalisation of decision making, particularly with the support of regional advisors. [Timeline – Priority 1, immediate].”

Had a similar approach been embedded into MERF 2’s design, it might have enabled smaller responses with smaller budgets, such as for Southern Tunisia, to go ahead based on the low monetary value of the response with relatively little risk. The second part of the recommendation highlights the importance of Member participation with contextual or thematic knowledge (as opposed to that from DFID), as discussed elsewhere. Indeed, one interviewee felt the MERF as designed was adapted to the Tunisia context, but that personal and organisational dynamics got in the way.

“The design of MERF was adjusted to Tunisia needs but politics/people prevented it from being used. It was great being able to meet other INgos and coordinate better through the MERF mechanism.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

Alert 20 Morocco (Sudden relocation of vulnerable groups) was a strong example of where early action could have prevented a deterioration of the environment and subsequent emergency assistance needs; tensions built up into an emergency when their informal camps was set on fire. A member agency explained that an earlier alert had been rejected on the basis that the needs presented were ‘chronic’ and therefore not suitable for a MERF allocation. MERF subsequently allocated funds to support the response following the fire itself, but various respondents felt an earlier allocation could have prevented the fire from taking place altogether.

“MERF should broaden its criteria in terms of protracted crises. Many countries are lacking donors who are unwilling to fund medium-term responses. The situation facing migrants may be catastrophic but no real ‘crisis’ means it’s impossible to activate the
MERF: RISK OF ENCOURAGING MIGRANTS TO, EG, SET LIGHT TO THEIR CAMPS TO PROVOKE THE ‘CRISIS’ RESULTING IN ASSISTANCE / RESPONSE.” (ONLINE SURVEY RESPONDENT)

Respondents from a number of member agencies at field level stated that alert rejections such as these had discouraged them from continuing to make submissions to MERF.

FINDING 10: MERF 1 WHICH OPERATED PRIMARILY IN EASTERN EUROPE WAS SEEN TO OPERATE AT GREATER SCALE AND SPEED THAN MERF 2 OPERATING IN NORTH, WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA, SUGGESTING A GREATER NEED FOR THE MERF 1 MODEL

Between 2017 and 2020, the two phases of MERF disbursed some £4 million across their respective geographical regions through a total of 19 allocations (of which 6 were CICAs). Half of this was allocated through MERF 1 in just 10 months between January and October 2017, with a further £2 million allocated under MERF 2 in 20 months (double that of MERF 1) between August 2018 and March 2020.

Indeed, the external evaluation of MERF 1 emphasized its successful focus primarily on “emergency needs or specific peaks in which the needs can be appropriately address over a short-term period, especially when agencies have some assurance that funding will be available beyond the short-term response”.

A small number of respondents pointed to the fact that, in shifting the geographical focus from primarily Eastern Europe (some few African countries were included) to the 11 countries in North, Central and West Africa under MERF 2, options for funding mixed migration in Eastern Europe had effectively been shut down despite outstanding needs. The comparison was not specifically made in the online survey but some respondents commented on themes that subsequently arose in interviews.

“IN 2017 BEFORE MERF MOVED TO NORTH AFRICA IT PROVIDED MUCH NEEDED HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT TO MIGRATION-RELATED EMERGENCIES IN EUROPE. THE EU-TURKEY DEAL SAW THE NUMBERS ABLE TO CROSS INTO EUROPE REDUCE BUT ALSO TRAPPED THOUSANDS ON THE GREEK ISLANDS. IN RECENT MONTHS NUMBERS ENTERING THE BALKAN STATES INCREASED TWOFOLD. THE BALKANS AND ‘FRONT LINE’ STATES STILL NEED A HUMANITARIAN FUND TO SUPPORT MIGRATION-RELATED EMERGENCIES IN EUROPE AND MIGRANTS.” (ONLINE SURVEY RESPONDENT)

In Niger, two MERF alerts were used to initiate camp set-up, install or upgrade WASH facilities at transit sites or provide basic assistance. In all instances, the existing presence of IOM or UNHCR meant that activities took place against a backdrop of ongoing humanitarian interventions, with MERF complementing to fund specific actions.

In Morocco and Tunisia, MERF was seen as a means of addressing the needs of populations who could not otherwise be targeted, in part due to the absence of alternative funding and in part due to the legal status of those in need.

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12 Heloise Ruaudel’s “The Migration Emergency Response Fund and Mixed Migration flows along the Mediterranean, 2018” - the same evaluation went on to flag the emerging challenges, stating “the mechanism in its current form may not be so easily compatible to address a broader category of needs that require a more structure and prolonged response than the two or even four-month period provided by the MERF, especially if follow-up funding is not identified at the onset… Furthermore, ensuring the sustainability of the response in a context of donor disengagement has proved difficult and often implies that shortfalls in the response persist.”
Longer-term funding in the North Africa region was rarely available and MERF was used to attempt to bridge sustained gaps or at least enable INGO members to continue to support local partners. For one partner working in North Africa, MERF funds enabled them to begin programming with migrant communities in Morocco and subsequently secure longer-term funding in this area from the EU via IOM.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, no one interviewed felt that MERF 2 allocations had failed to respond to needs or that any allocation was unjustified. Interviewees pointed to MERF funding as a source of gap-filling in almost all contexts, albeit for very different reasons, even if the identified need continued after the project period ended. As such MERF 2 funding did not conclusively address needs but was fast to respond and acted as an important stop-gap or start-up funding while agencies sought longer term funding elsewhere. In some cases, as with the migrant ‘caravans’ in Central America in 2018, migration-related funds from the Start Fund met the immediate need and as the ‘caravans’ moved northwards towards the emergency had passed and the needs dissipated.

**Finding 11: The Collaborative Information Collection and Analysis (CICA) Grants Were Seen as Useful, But Difficult to Initiate with Member Agencies Rarely Having Pre-Positioned Capacity to Actually Deploy for Assessments**

No specific questions were included into the online survey on the CICAs but a number of interview respondents pointed to the potential of CICAs to proactively shape a narrative and build or influence donor understanding in particular. There was consensus however that the current format is difficult to exploit due to capacity issues.

“CICA has design flaws, it relies of goodwill of people. This doesn’t promote rapid deployment, you need people on standby just to do this. Who can do this? Only those who are already have the capacity - basically only Reach is able to respond. Nigeria a good example - nobody was really ready to do it. If you want to do it you need to hire someone to do it... but who is going to do this and with which human resources?” (Interview, Member Agency)

In MERF 2, four CICA allocations were awarded. Some interviewees felt agencies did not have the capacity to suddenly take on surveys/assessments and a number suggested that given their regional presence MERF could have initiated CICAs themselves through pre-vetted research entities that may or may not be part of the Start Network.

“We have the funding pot for CICAs for agencies to apply for it, as opposed to MERF setting their own research agenda and setting up their own research projects using the CICA pot. This would be more
Waiting for agencies to find the time, capacity and inclination acted as a delay and/or disinclination to raise CICA alerts, especially from agencies that do not have research expertise and/or have reluctance to look for this capacity during an emergency period.

“A CICA PRESUPPOSES A TEAM IS IN PLACE AND ABLE TO KICKSTART ACTIVITIES – AGENCIES ARE ALREADY WORKING WITH LIMITED CAPACITY, IT’S DIFFICULT TO SUDDENLY SCALE UP. YOU CAN’T HIRE SOMEONE QUALIFIED FOR 2-3 MONTHS AND IN A MATTER OF DAYS, BUT ACTIVE AGENCIES WITH PRESENCE TO ACTUALLY SEE THE NEED FOR A CICA RARELY HAVE CAPACITY SITTING AROUND WAITING TO BE DEPLOYED.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

5.4 - COHERENCE

In terms of MERF being coherent with and fitting well with Start Network’s wider objectives of offering new finance models in a more localised and innovative way, most survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, and only 2% disagreed (Table 5.9).

**TABLE 5.8 - COHERENCE AND COORDINATION? (ALL RESPONDENTS)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>I don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coherence: MERF has fit Start’s wider objectives of offering new finance in a more localized and innovative way</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>6 (13%)</td>
<td>19 (40%)</td>
<td>20 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coordination: MERF has brought agencies together for the purposes of operational response or common advocacy</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
<td>11 (23%)</td>
<td>14 (29%)</td>
<td>15 (31%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As discussed above in terms of coordination and collective action, respondents widely agreed that MERF had brought agencies together in different ways – another aim of Start Network.

**FINDING 12: WHERE MERF PLAYS A SIMILAR EMERGENCY FUNCTION TO THE START FUND, THE START FUND WOULD SUFFICE. HOWEVER, MERF’S EXPERIENCES HAVE HIGHLIGHTED THE CHRONIC STRUCTURAL GAPS AND NEGLECTED CRISIS IN MIGRATION RESPONSE MORE BROADLY IN A WAY THAT START FUND COULD NOT / WOULD NOT HAVE RESPONDED TO.**

During the MERF 1 and 2, the Start Fund also made allocations in favour of mixed migration alerts in Peru, Ecuador, Mexico, Guatemala and Iraq (among others). This raises the question as to whether the mixed migration needs that have been met by the MERF could in fact be equally well met by the Start Fund directly.

“THE CREATION OF A MECHANISM SPECIFICALLY TO RESPOND TO MIGRANT POPULATION HAS HELPED MAKE FUNDING DIRECTLY ACCESSIBLE TO ACTORS AT..."
Reactions to this varied but on the whole, there was consensus that MERF could indeed function within the global Start Fund. A small number of respondents even felt that uptake of available funding might have been higher under the Start Fund than it was under MERF 2, in particular, due to greater familiarity with Start Fund amongst member agencies. People spoke of confusion in relation to changing rules and geographical scope. Many of those interviewed mention that this confusion did not exist among headquarter staff or those dealing with resource mobilisation, but the field offices and practitioners on the ground.

A few interviewees representing larger INGOs cited the existence of their own internal agency inertia, ignorance or lack of capacity in terms of understanding and seeking MERF financing for emergencies they could have responded to. Some spoke of finding it difficult to convince their teams to consider MERF as a funding option unless pushed and supported by regional or headquarter staff, or unless they had dedicated staff who had engagement/fundraising with the Start Network as part of their ‘job description’ or terms of reference.

The survey results also echo these mixed findings with 34% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that MERF could be merged into a general rapid response fund (or Start Fund) and be just as effective (Table 5.10). But 33 per cent disagreed or disagreed strongly while another 33% were neutral or did not know how to respond. In terms of the online survey this question elicited the greatest disagreement when compared to other questions where the responses were normally highly positive and not ambivalent. An analysis of responses against positions held indicates slightly more disagreement amongst Start employees and HQ staff than amongst field based and local partner respondents.

Table 5.9 - Merging MERF into Start Fund? (All respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MERF could be merged into a general rapid response fund (or Start Fund) and be just as effective</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
<td>12 (25%)</td>
<td>13 (27%)</td>
<td>8 (17%)</td>
<td>8 (17%)</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the whole, HQ-based and Start Network staff tended to be more in favour of merging MERF into the Start Fund. Field-based member agency staff were more likely to argue for a dedicated fund such as MERF, although the reasons for this tended to be one of principle and highlighting migration as an issue, rather than practice or the mechanism itself. A number recognised that a dedicated migration fund was perhaps more relevant during the acute crisis in Europe across 2015-16, but felt this moment had passed.

“Migration is a critical issue and highly significant and one that warrants special focus and a special fund with special expertise.”

(Interview, Member Agency)

Through the online survey however, 92% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that ‘MERF has offered specialised support to migration-related humanitarian emergencies’, and 61% felt that it ‘made sense to
Furthermore, 70% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that ‘a fund dedicated to mixed migration emergencies adds value over a general humanitarian pooled fund’ and only 13% disagreed (Table 5.11).

Some felt there was no need to have a dedicated fund at all and while it may have helped address specific gaps in 2016/2017 in Eastern Europe, going forward it would be better sitting as part of Start Fund and enabling greater flexibility of Start’s use of funds. Agency staff in headquarters or regional positions in member agencies and Start in London, questioned the need to have a fund separated out from other humanitarian needs. Nevertheless, when asked in the survey if ‘a migration-specific fund, like MERF, will be relevant in the future,’ 77 per cent agreed with 43 per cent ‘strongly agreeing’ and only 10 per cent disagreeing, with just 4 per cent strongly disagreeing (Table 5.12).

### Table 5.10 – Adding Value over a Pooled Fund? (All Respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A fund dedicated to mixed migration emergencies adds value over a general humanitarian pooled fund</td>
<td>1 (2%) 5 (11%) 6 (13%) 15 (32%) 18 (38%) 2 (4%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the sole donor of MERF, DFID valued them as a valid response to evident needs but also as a being a good fit with their wider regional Safety, Support and Solutions programme (SSS 1 & 2). DFID representatives defended the need to have DFID in the allocations committees as useful for oversight and protecting MERF and DFID from possible ‘politicised or inappropriate decisions’. There appears to be ongoing philosophical discussion within DFID and specifically the Migration and Modern Slavery Department as to whether Start Network should offer a migration-targeted fund or make the Start Fund more migration-sensitive.

### Table 5.11 – And in the Future? (All Respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N=47</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>I don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A migration-specific fund, like MERF, will be relevant in the future</td>
<td>2 (4%) 3 (6%) 6 (13%) 16 (34%) 20 (43%) 0 (0%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As discussed in Section 5.3, Impact, where respondents argued in favour of a dedicated fund this was mainly justified by the absence of alternative funding sources in a given context. In addition, respondents felt the migration focus of MERF brought a clear emphasis on migration as a humanitarian challenge requiring specialised competencies and responses along with dedicated funding. A number of respondents in favour of dedicated funding pointed to the risk that losing MERF would effectively close down funding opportunities altogether. Others, who regularly use and have a high regard for the Start Fund, were supportive of the idea of MERF being absorbed by the Start Fund as long as it brought additional funds, i.e. its inclusion would grow the overall available pot of funds, not dilute it.

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13 MERF 2 exists and is funded as a structural component of the SSS II. It requested no funding extraneous to the SSS II programme and as such is a part of the larger DFID SSS ‘business case’.

14 A migration-sensitive fund would be open to requests involving mixed migration crises while a migration-dedicated fund would exist only for mixed migration crises.
Respondents based in Morocco and Tunisia in particular were strongly in favour of dedicated migration funding, as it has enabled them to bridge structural funding gaps in migration contexts with very little alternative funding sources and no other humanitarian funding streams. At the same time, they recognised the needs they were addressing were chronic rather than acute, and they frequently struggled to work within MERF’s emergency criteria.

“We have seen that through the MERF often members are addressing some more ‘slow burner’ humanitarian issues, rather than rapid urgent humanitarian needs that tend to be addressed through the Start Fund.” (Interview, Member Agency)

In contrast to difficulties faced in the North Africa region, one of the most straightforward examples of MERF 2 funding is that of Alert 19, funding Mercy Corps in Niger, who were working in a region outside the country-level ECHO-funded rapid response mechanism with a “new” refugee population in Maradi Region. As described by Mercy Corps they were prepositioned as a development actor, and a ‘traditional’ emergency situation arose where MERF allowed them to ringfence their development work and use additional MERF funds to address the emergency needs. This is precisely the ‘niche’ that the Start Fund fills globally and raised the question why such projects could not be funded through a general pooled fund instead of a dedicated one?

Finding 14: There are clear examples of where MERF fulfilled both of Start Fund’s ‘niche’ roles of A) complementary funding in emergencies and B) highlighting structural funding gaps in responding to under-served / neglected emergencies in MERF 1 and MERF 2

“Why were there not more alerts? Because of the definition we gave to ‘emergency’. Migration is a chronic emergency - but it’s not seen as an emergency by the MERF, it’s not ‘exceptional’, so it’s impossible to justify. To respond to migration in Morocco, there needs to be more of a community approach where people are embedded in a broader zonal or developmental mentality and methods. There is no preventive aspect foreseen in MERF, we must wait until chronic becomes acute.” (Interview, Member Agency)

No one interviewed felt migration emergencies should not be funded through Start Network financing facilities, although a number of respondents highlighted the politicisation of migration generally and the need for humanitarian actors – including Start Fund - to make careful choices as a result. Everyone felt mixed migration contexts represented need that requires emergency funding options but as discussed above, views on how such funding should be made available by Start Network in the future (post December 2020) varied considerably and respondents were not always clear which tool was most applicable to migration.

15 While the MERF has deliberately sought to extend project implementation timeframes in recognition that mixed migration contexts can require longer-term engagement (proposing 1-3 month or 3-6 month timeframes), response duration was primarily a concern for those seeking to operate in under-served conditions such as in North Africa where even the MERF’s longer window as compared to Start Fund was seen to be insufficient.
“I AM NOT SURE WHETHER THERE IS COHERENCE WITH OTHER START NETWORK MECHANISMS LIKE START FUND OR START ANTICIPATION WINDOW IS THAT CLEAR, WHEN IT COMES TO SUPPORT TO REFUGEES. WHEN DOES MIGRATION START? AS IDP IN THE OWN COUNTRY? AS REFUGEE IN THEIR NEIGHBOUR COUNTRY? AS A REFUGEE ON A WELL-KNOWN MIGRATION ROUTE?” (ONLINE SURVEY RESPONDENT)

Some interview respondents suggested Start Network should either have a dedicated, standalone migration fund while others, including senior Start Network staff, felt it should be one of the tools in the ‘toolbox’ of potential funding ‘packets’ that Start is currently envisioning going forward.

“The longer-term vision is to have a single channel for funding members work. But within that channel there would be a ‘toolbox’ approach to offering different mechanisms for different needs to cover the broad range of humanitarian need occurring and the network member’s interventions.” (INTERVIEW, START NETWORK)

Still others argued that migration crises should just be one of a broad raft of humanitarian needs to which future Start Network facilities must be able to respond and there was no logic in giving one area of humanitarian support its own fund unless it was clearly time-bound, such as the Start Fund COVID-19 fund is expected to be.

“I WAS SOMEWHAT SURPRISED THAT START HAD A DEDICATED MIGRATION FUND. COUNTRY-FOCUSED FUNDS MAKE MORE SENSE THAN THEMATIC DEDICATED FUNDS.” (INTERVIEW, START NETWORK)

“How far does the top-up humanitarian fund go - and should there be a two-tier fund, or should it be explicitly linked to other structural funds? This is a nexus question.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

Survey respondents were far more in favour of maintaining a dedicated fund, with 77% agreeing or strongly agreeing that ‘a migration-specific fund, like MERF, will be relevant in the future’ (see section 5.5, Relevance below for further discussion).

As discussed in section 5.2, Effectiveness, those that commented on the contribution of specialised migration expertise within the Start team were keen that this aspect would not be lost in any future developments. It was also suggested by some interviewees that in terms of a geographical perspective, a routes-based approach would be valuable. Migrant journeys cross borders and their vulnerabilities are often specific to the routes they are on.

“We are now funding positions across routes - route coordinators - to have a better information loop going back along the different routes.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)
Where projects were funded under MERF, they tended to fall into two categories: Those sitting within the first Start Fund ‘niche’ (of top up emergency funds), such as the alerts in Niger, would also have been able to access funding directly through the Start Fund. Those which are closer to the second niche category, that of under-served, chronic or neglected crises such as in Morocco and Tunisia, would have found it more challenging to access the Start Fund and faced greater limitations in terms of timeframes.

This would suggest that if there is value in creating an additional tool (standalone or as part of a wider package within Start Fund) to respond to migration crises, it sits within the second ‘niche’. A 2019 external analysis of Start Fund’s engagement in ‘under the radar’ crises identified a number of challenges, but particularly relevant to mixed migration are a) the lack of a clear definition internally to designate ‘under the radar’ crises within Start globally, and b) a clear institutional position in terms of ‘so what?’ with a view to enabling internal prioritisation and balance between different tools and ‘niches’.

Some interview respondents highlighted this lack of guidance as an obstacle, while recognising the inherent contradiction this poses in providing ‘flexible’ funding, but underlining the importance of internal clarity and prioritisation.

MERF 2 examples from Tunisia and Morocco would likely fall into a categorisation of ‘under the radar’ crises but the experiences of Member agencies active in these countries underline the absence of clear internal criteria and subsequent guidance in terms of prioritisation by MERF / Start Fund. Two immediately relevant recommendations from the 2019 study address this question of ‘balance’, as faced by the MERF, and are as follows:

- **Utilise a single definition of ‘under the radar’ for decision making and reporting. By necessity, this will include global and local elements.**

  The ‘so what’ question must be answered by Start Fund. If a crisis is categorised as ‘under the radar’ using a new definition, the question of balancing its two niches and other functions is important. A linear progression ‘more funding to under the radar crises is better’ must have a limit.

- **The Start Fund should initiate an internal discussion about the ideal balance between its functions.**

  Given the need to apply global and local considerations to any definition of ‘under the radar’ crisis, categorisation ought to give equal weight to national, and international response and coordination.

  (2019, “Start Fund involvement in under the radar crises”)

The overall conclusions of the 2019 analysis of Start Fund’s engagement in ‘under the radar’ crises suggests this is an emerging, if not to say challenging, area for Start Fund organisationally, as well as for MERF, and it would make sense to share and consolidate learning with a view to informing future decisions.
5.5 RELEVANCE

Both interviews and comments made in the online survey indicate broad support for a dedicated, flexible migration fund in response in widespread acknowledgment of unmet needs. An impressive 92% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that MERF offered specialised support to migration-related humanitarian emergencies (Table 5.13).

**TABLE 5.12 SUPPORTING MIGRATION-RELATED EMERGENCIES? (ALL RESPONDENTS)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>I don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance: MERF has offered specialised support to migration-related humanitarian emergencies</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
<td>18 (38%)</td>
<td>26 (54%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A number of interviewees also referred to the ‘huge potential’ of MERF as a flexible fund focusing on migration. However, no one suggested that the Start Fund had been problematic in funding migration-related emergencies. Indeed, those that used the Start Fund for emergencies in general and in relation to migration response specifically were highly complementary of the facility.

However, interview findings also revealed a strong consensus that the humanitarian parameters of the MERF 2 were not well adapted to the actual migration context in North, Central, and West Africa, and that as such MERF was rarely able to provide the sort of support required in terms of addressing an endemic or systemic and longer-term issue of migration or providing on-going relief to continual migration needs. As previously mentioned, practitioners suggested sudden emergencies were less evident in these regions than an on-going need for protection and support to vulnerable migrants along certain routes and in particular locations.

**FINDING 15: WIDE ACCEPTANCE THAT MIXED MIGRATION FLOWS WILL CONTINUE TO BE A GLOBAL PHENOMENON, REQUIRING AT TIMES EMERGENCY RESPONSES IN THE FUTURE, AND A BROAD CONSENSUS ON A NEED FOR GREATER ATTENTION AND FUNDING FOR MIGRATION INCLUDING OUTSIDE EMERGENCY CONTEXTS DUE TO THE SYSTEMIC ISSUES AROUND MOVEMENT AND POLITICS**

Many interview respondents recognised that the development of ERR to MERF 1 and 2 was a response to the political and humanitarian focus on mixed migration as it was thrust into the headline news for some years from 2014 onwards. Some felt this moment had passed and there were far fewer crises apparent and the structural and political nature of the migration problematic reveals that the humanitarian imperative for a dedicated fund has diminished over time.

Nevertheless, interviewees frequently alluded to the special nature of mixed migration and the emergencies related to mobility and displacement.

“MIGRATION IS SPECIAL AND DIFFERENT FROM MOST HUMANITARIAN SITUATIONS: IT’S A JOURNEY, PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED AT DIFFERENT POINTS AND IN DIFFERENT WAYS. MORE COMPLEX. IS IT AN AID PROBLEM OR HUMANITARIAN ISSUE?” (INTERVIEW, START NETWORK)

Few doubted that needs continued but in terms of the extent of the needs and the nature of the needs the
situation had changed. Many of those interviewed mentioned that migration issues demanded a more systemic and policy-based response (advocacy) and were not easily addressed by short term emergency responses.

“MIGRATION IS MORE OF A SYSTEMIC ISSUE NEEDING LONGER TERM SOLUTIONS, SO ON THE GROUND IN NORTH AFRICA WE STRUGGLED TO MAKE PROPOSAL THAT SUITED MERF’S CRITERIA.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY HQ)

Some agencies working with migrants and refugees felt strongly that there was a continued need for a migration-dedicated fund because of overlooked situations and pockets of high need, particularly in areas that were not readily covered by institutional funding or those that were outside the DAC recommended recipient countries of ODA funding. These areas, such as Greece, Italy and part of the Balkans, are not covered by the Start Fund, MERF 2 or the COVID-19 Fund (but they were covered by ERR and MERF I) for the same reason but remained high on the radar for migration-focused agencies responding to emergency need.

Finally, those interviewed who were familiar with Start Network and the origins of MERF suggested that its conception and establishment was donor-driven and even politically driven.

“THE START OF MERF WAS SOMEWHAT OPPORTUNISTIC BUT THE OPPORTUNISTIC APPROACH HAS TYPIFIED START NETWORKS DEVELOPMENT, FOR EXAMPLE THE NEW COVID 19 FUND. START ALLOWS ITSELF TO BE LED BY THE ENERGY OF THE MEMBERS AND THE ENERGY OF DONORS.” (INTERVIEW, START NETWORK)

FINDING 16: GEOGRAPHIC RESTRICTIONS WERE REPEATEDLY SEEN AS A DRAWBACK BY MANY RESPONDENTS AND INTERVIEWEES

For MERF the most acutely felt gap was the geographical restrictions which means after MERF 1 ended there was no resource to dedicated migration and refugee funding in a scenario where there were thousands of people still in need. This situation was compounded by the restrictions attached to Start Funding and the new COVID-19 fund that make it impossible or ‘more complicated’ for funds to be allocated in non-DAC recipients of ODA countries in Europe.

“THERE ARE CURRENTLY AN ESTIMATED 8,000 STILL IN THE COUNTRY. IN GREECE THERE ARE OVER 115,000 REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS OF WHICH 34,875 ARE TRAPPED ON THE GREEK ISLANDS AND LIVING IN 5 RECEPTION AND IDENTIFICATION CENTRES (RICS), ORIGINALLY DESIGNED FOR 6,095 PEOPLE. FOR EXAMPLE THERE ARE 18,382 REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN MORIA LIVING IN A RIC WITH THE CAPACITY OF 2,757. RECENTLY WE RECEIVED

16 ‘More complicated’ but possible, such as COVID-19 allocations to Bosnia — a qualification added during the review of this report by Start staff.
FUNDING FROM START FOR BOSNIA TO PROVIDE FOOD FOR 850 VULNERABLE REFUGEES (MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN) HOMELESS AND ISOLATED WITH NO GOVERNMENT SUPPORT IN SARAJEVO. THERE WAS SOME RELUCTANCE INITIALLY TO SUPPORT OUR CALL FOR AN ALERT BECAUSE BOSNIA STRUGGLED TO COMPETE IN SCALE WITH OTHER EMERGENCIES AROUND THE WORLD. THE MIGRANT CRISIS IN EUROPE IS NOT AT THE SCALE IT WAS IN 2015 BUT IT HAS NOT GONE AWAY AND APART FROM A FEW ENLIGHTENED EUROPEAN GOVERNMENTS THERE IS LITTLE SUPPORT FOR THESE STATELESS PEOPLE PARTICULARLY IN THE BALKANS, GREECE AND ITALY. “ (ONLINE SURVEY RESPONDENT)

This is not to say respondents were in favour of no restrictions at all. While a majority of KII and survey respondents felt that MERF would be more relevant if it had no geographical restrictions, a sizable minority (38% of survey respondents) were neutral or disagreed with this statement (Table 5.14).

**TABLE 5.13 REMOVING GEOGRAPHICAL RESTRICTIONS? (ALL RESPONDENTS)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>I don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MERF would be more relevant if it had no geographical restrictions</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>7 (15%)</td>
<td>9 (19%)</td>
<td>13 (28%)</td>
<td>15 (32%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the case of South America or the Middle East, Start Network members looking for support for migration-related interventions can apply through Start Fund instead of MERF, but key countries in Europe are out of bounds for all three funds. This is a significant gap in the applicability of Start Network financing facilities and somewhat ironic considering the six donors of the Start Fund (and MERF) are European.

Various interviewees cited these gaps and suggested they limited the effectiveness and potential impact of the Start Network in terms of having a global reach. Some interviewees also suggested that due to the politicised nature of migration issues and funding, the block on using Start Network funds in Europe also serve the political interests of government donors (including DFID) and others in Europe who may prefer to allow certain humanitarian crises to not be addressed, hoping that immiseration is a form of mobility deterrence.

**FINDING 17: INSUFFICIENT ANALYSIS AT THE DESIGN STAGES RESULTED IN A DISCONNECT BETWEEN THE MIGRATION CONTEXT AS A PROTECTION AND DEVELOPMENT CRISIS AND MERF AS A HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE FUND FIRST AND FOREMOST : CONTEXT-SPECIFIC, NEEDS-BASED ANALYSIS AS A BASIS FOR DESIGNING AND FUNDING RESPONSE MECHANISMS SUCH AS THE MERF IS ESSENTIAL**

“The reason for low uptake of MERF 2 is due to it not being the right fit for North and West Africa. This route is not facing thousands of abandoned and beleaguered refugees and asylum seekers who need urgent support and who are often in concentrated locations...the
Analysis of the DRC-IRC-Start Network Consortium’s proposal to DFID for SSS2, of which MERF 2 is a component, and indeed of DFID’s own Business Case underpinning DFID’s internal approval and allocation processes, suggests a common gap in the wider Theory of Change behind both the consortia programme and MERF specifically. Contextual analysis provided by the INGOs as well as that given by DFID outline a strong protection needs analysis, accurately highlighting the extent to which the West and North African mixed migration context of MERF 2 was likely to be different to that of Eastern Europe under MERF 1. Both documents also emphasise that ‘traditional’ humanitarian assistance is likely to be less relevant in the West and North African context and that accurate data would be challenging.17

Interviewees from DFID also questioned how far MERF was able to respond to realities on the ground, specifically MERF 2 with its geographical limitations of North, Central and West African countries. For the Eastern Mediterranean Route (MERF 1) it was felt MERF was a “better fit” and that the model of MERF 1 was re-used in MERF 2 without deeper analysis of whether the same model was suitable for the new context. In Europe it was clearer that all responses were mixed migration (helped by a ‘camp’ approach) whereas in North and West Africa, the responses intertwine with large scale humanitarian crises within the countries themselves as well as waves of forced displacement towards neighbouring countries. Populations at risk are less likely to be found in camps, and it is therefore much harder to target relevant populations when implementing migration specific projects in these regions.

“ONE SPECIFICITY IS THAT THEY ARE NOT IN CAMPS, WHICH THEN REQUIRES A ZONAL OR INCLUSIVE APPROACH.” (INTERVIEW, START NETWORK)

While MERF 2 did make some important adjustments primarily in timeframes (allowing alerts from 1-3 months to 3-6 months) and increased budget amounts, the basic mechanism remained conceived as a short-term emergency response fund and the question of how, or whether, MERF 2 could adjust to a protection (or human rights) crisis does not appear to have been explicitly addressed during the design process.

“IT’S NOT A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS, IT’S A PROTECTION / HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS REQUIRING DEVELOPMENT RESPONSE. MERF WASN’T DESIGNED FOR THIS - DFID ASSUMED BORDER CONTROLS MEANT THE EU TRUST FUND WAS RELEVANT, AND DFID WOULD LOOK AT THE PROTECTION CONSEQUENCES OF THAT (IE PEOPLE STUCK AT BORDERS, SMUGGLERS ETC). BUT THERE WAS NO THEORY OF CHANGE BEHIND THIS. WE CANNOT TACKLE THE PROBLEM, ONLY THE CONSEQUENCES. THERE IS A BIG GAP IN THE ASSUMPTIONS TO SOLUTIONS IN THE THEORY OF CHANGE. THIS IS ALSO WHY EVERYONE IS STRUGGLING WITH REACHING THE TARGETS.” (INTERVIEW, MEMBER AGENCY)

17 Greater attention to protection needs was also a recommendation of the MERF 1 External Evaluation (Op Cit), while acknowledging the inherent limitations of emergency funding.
Respondents mostly put this down to gaps in the understanding of the migration context, a relatively rapid design process in shifting MERF 1 to MERF 2, and an assumption that flexibility meant just that – funds sufficiently flexible to be able to address almost any needs stemming from mixed migration, including in contexts with limited accurate data.

“The alert was not upheld because the main argument was lack of numbers and facts on who was in transit in the zone, a belief that not enough migrants were transiting. But it’s always estimates, it’s always difficult to get serious figures on migration and how many migrants…. This is one of the key difficulties in securing funding in general and also in the MERF. It is impossible to allocate 300k GBP against performance indicators targeting 1000 beneficiaries, we never know how many it’s going to be.” (Interview, Member Agency)

However, the overarching question of MERF’s primary purpose – top up emergency funding, or underserved chronic crises - echoes findings from the 2019 Start Fund External Evaluation ‘Preparedness for Growth’, which explored the question of ‘under the radar crises’. The study recommended that Start Fund “consider the possibility of longer allocations (possibly up to 180 days) for ‘under the radar’ crisis, anticipation alerts and responses for partners in protection and education under circumstances to be clearly defined. In each case it would need to be demonstrated that any Start Fund allocation is complementary to other funding channels (i.e. no other donors are filling the Start Fund niche). [All priority 2].” Indeed, a stronger analysis within MERF around what circumstances fit protection responses and where alternative donors are absent could have enabled greater use of the longer timeframes.

“The contexts where MERF is operational tend to be predominantly development, with a limited humanitarian portfolio in many cases. Yet the MERF design is distinctly humanitarian, particularly in terms of the time-frames. Greater flexibility was built into the MERF, but the decision makers rarely permitted projects to extend to beyond 3-months. I think that the MERF is an example of a funding mechanism that sits across the humanitarian-development-peace building nexus, and needs to be designed accordingly. And this is incredibly challenging without compromising on some parts, which the Start Network and its humanitarian purpose are unlikely to do easily.” (Online survey respondent)
ALERT 2 BULGARIA, HEALTH CONSULTATION FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS (CREDIT: DOCTORS OF THE WORLD)
SECTION 6: KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
On the whole, MERF is shown to be a highly effective and well-functioning fund achieving many of its objectives and enabling member agencies to respond rapidly in discrete migration emergency crises in the geographical jurisdictions covered by its various phases. In instances where the fund was utilised, it was widely assessed to have provided life-saving humanitarian support.

However, in terms of missed opportunities and relevance to wider migration response, or coherence with the Start Network’s future change agenda, this research shows that MERF raises significant strategic and structural questions. Therefore, key findings and recommendations relate primarily to the strategic level rather than to the context or project levels.

Key findings have been grouped into common strategic areas of reflection as a basis for making recommendations in terms of Start’s engagement with mixed migration going forward, rather than under the research framework of effectiveness, impact, relevance and coherence.

**The MERF Regional Model Provides Useful Insights into the Added Value of Regional and Context- or Thematic-Specific Teams**

- **Key Finding:** Regional presence and close collaboration at field level are highly valued by members, bringing unanticipated benefits in coordination in particular. The potential for collective advocacy by members is not fully exploited.
- **Key Finding:** Contextual and/or migration knowledge amongst members involved in allocation processes is considered fundamental amongst members.
- **Key Finding:** Start Fund is a recognized brand, particularly amongst members with strong UK presence. MERF did not always benefit from this brand familiarity and lower levels of familiarity amongst field actors in primarily francophone MERF 2 regions may have contributed to a lower uptake amongst members. Outreach required substantial investments including physical visits to countries and agencies from the regional MERF team.
- **Key Finding:** English as the sole working language can be an impediment for INGO members and local partners alike – agencies working with the MERF Coordinator based regionally in Tunis highly rated their ability to communicate in French.

**Recommendation 1: Document Lessons Learned through an Internal Consultation Process with the MERF Team, as Part of Wider Planning Processes for Decentralised Fund Management and Hub Set Up.**

The internal consultation process should include a focus on, at minimum:

- The levels of investment that were made by the MERF team to raise awareness and promote understanding of the MERF as an available funding source amongst members.
- The time and resources required internally to adapt processes, templates and procedures to MERF requirements.
- The capacity required to meet inward/outward facing language requirements as performed by the MERF Hub.
- The broader roles regional presence can play – in certain contexts – in external coordination structures.
RECOMMENDATION 2: CONSIDER KEEPING ALL FUNDING INSTRUMENTS MORE CLEARLY UNDER THE START FUND BRAND / IDENTITY TO AVOID HAVING TO RE-FAMILIARISE OR RE-PUBLICISE THEM AMONGST MEMBERS, PARTICULARLY IF THEY ARE DECENTRALISED TO COUNTRY OR REGIONAL LEVELS. THIS WILL LIKELY STILL REQUIRE ADDITIONAL ENGAGEMENT AMONGST NON-UK / NON-TRADITIONAL MEMBERS, AND POSSIBLY EVEN WITH EXISTING UK-BASED MEMBERS GIVEN THE EXTENT TO WHICH MEMBER PARTICIPATION IN START PROCESSES TO DATE TENDS TO SIT WITH MEMBERS’ HQ STAFF RATHER THAN AT REGION OR COUNTRY.

RECOMMENDATION 3: IN PLANNING FOR REGIONAL OR COUNTRY-BASED MECHANISMS, START NETWORK SHOULD ACTIVELY PLAN FOR ADDITIONAL CAPACITY AND RESOURCES FOR START NETWORK STRUCTURES (REGIONAL / COUNTRY) TO BE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE IN AND EVEN INITIATE INGO / MEMBER COORDINATION WHERE HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION STRUCTURES ARE NOT ALREADY PRESENT. THIS CAPACITY SHOULD INCLUDE LINGUISTIC CAPACITY

RECOMMENDATION 4: LINKED TO THE ABOVE, DATA GATHERING, ALERTS AND CICAS COULD PROVIDE CONTENT ON WHICH TO BUILD EFFECTIVE COLLECTIVE ADVOCACY. THE POTENTIAL FOR THIS SHOULD BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT WHEN PLANNING FOR START NETWORK REGIONAL OR COUNTRY CAPACITY

RECOMMENDATION 5: THE START NETWORK SHOULD EXPLORE HOW, GOING FORWARD, LOCAL PARTNERS CAN BE EXPLICITLY INVITED INTO IN THE ALERT AND ALLOCATION PROCESS BOTH AS PART OF START’S COMMITMENTS TO LOCALISATION AND IN SUPPORT OF INFORMED ANALYSIS AND DECISION MAKING

DECISIONS ON FINANCING MECHANISMS ARE NOT SYSTEMATICALLY EMBEDDED IN RELEVANT CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

- **KEY FINDING:** Donor engagement was perceived by Members to compromise the INGO identity of Start Network and MERF, in particular its peer to peer collaboration
- **KEY FINDING:** The principle of a dedicated migration fund is valued, but humanitarian parameters proved to be restrictive for MERF 2 to achieve impact
- **KEY FINDING:** MERF 1 which operated primarily in Eastern Europe was seen to operate at greater scale and speed than MERF 2 operating in North, West and Central Africa, suggesting a greater need for the MERF 1 model
- **KEY FINDING:** Insufficient analysis at the design stages resulted in a disconnect between the migration context as a protection and human rights (development) crisis and MERF as a humanitarian assistance fund first and foremost: context-specific, needs-based analysis as a basis for designing and funding response mechanisms such as the MERF is essential

RECOMMENDATION 6: NEW DEDICATED FUNDS TARGETING SPECIFIC REGIONS OR THEMES MUST BE DEVELOPED SOLELY IN RESPONSE TO IDENTIFIED NEEDS. ANY DECISION TO TARGET OR EARMARK FUNDING FOR MIGRATION SHOULD BE BASED ON A CLEAR THEORY OF CHANGE UNDERPINNED BY ASSUMPTIONS BASED ON EVIDENCE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF MEMBERS TO ENSURE PARAMETERS AND DECISION-MAKING CRITERIA ARE ADAPTED TO THE CONTEXT.
RECOMMENDATION 7: MEANINGFULLY ENGAGEMENT AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR LOCAL PARTNERS, PARTICULARLY IN THE ABSENCE OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN CAPACITY, SHOULD BE PRIORITISED AS IT IS CRUCIAL TO ENSURING PROGRAMMING IS EFFECTIVE AND RELEVANT TO NEEDS, PARTICULARLY IN CONTEXTS WHERE INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN CAPACITY IS LIMITED.

RECOMMENDATION 8: START NETWORK SHOULD AIM TO SOURCE AND POOL DONOR MONEY THAT CAN BE AVAILABLE FOR MIGRATION—RELATED EMERGENCIES IN NON-DAC LISTED COUNTRIES (I.E. EUROPE) AS WELL AS OTHER REGIONS, BECAUSE OF THE PARTICULAR NATURE OF MIGRATION—RELATED EMERGENCIES AND WHERE THEY OCCUR.

RECOMMENDATION 9: MAINTAINING INDEPENDENCE OF ACTION WHILE LEVERAGING FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES AND EXPLORING FUNDING FLOWS IS CRITICAL, PARTICULARLY WHEN THEMES OR REGIONS ARE PERCEIVED TO BE HIGHLY POLITICISED AND INSTRUMENTALISED. ANY DECISION TO ACCEPT FUNDING SHOULD BE BASED ON EXISTING START NETWORK STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND ETHICAL REVIEW AND FIT WITHIN START NETWORK’S BROADER HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES – INCLUDING INDEPENDENCE – AS AN NGO NETWORK.

MIXED MIGRATION IS EXPECTED TO CONTINUE TO REQUIRE FLEXIBLE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE CAPACITY GLOBALLY

- **KEY FINDING:** Strict parameters of criteria and / or budget requirements may at times prevent relevant interventions from taking place. MERF 2 appears to be curiously inflexible with regard to smaller, chronic or anticipatory actions.
- **KEY FINDING:** The Collaborative Information Collection and Analysis (CICA) grants were seen as useful, but difficult to initiate with member agencies rarely having pre-positioned capacity to actually deploy for assessments.
- **KEY FINDING:** Geographic restrictions were repeatedly seen as a drawback by many respondents and interviewees.
- **KEY FINDING:** Wide acceptance that mixed migration flows will continue to be a global phenomenon, requiring at times emergency responses in the future, and a broad consensus on a need for greater attention and funding for migration including outside emergency contexts due to the systemic issues around movement and associated politics.

RECOMMENDATION 10: START NETWORK SHOULD DRAW ON ITS INTERNAL LEARNING AND EXPERTISE GATHERED THROUGH ERR, MERF 1 AND MERF 2 TO INFORM CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT IN THE ISSUES OF MIXED MIGRATION GLOBALLY WITH THE FULL EXPECTATION THAT NEW MIGRATION—RELATED EMERGENCIES WILL ARISE AND POSSIBLY INCREASE IN THE FUTURE.

RECOMMENDATION 11: WHERE POSSIBLE, GEOGRAPHICAL LIMITATIONS FOR PROGRAMMES SHOULD BE AVOIDED BUT IF UNAVOIDABLE START NETWORK SHOULD SEEK TO OFFER GEOGRAPHICAL OPTIONS THAT FAVOUR A ROUTES—BASED APPROACH AND LOGIC TO GEOGRAPHICAL CRITERIA.
RECOMMENDATION 12: START NETWORK SHOULD CONSIDER OPERATING CICAS UNDER ITS OWN DIRECT MANAGEMENT WITH/ OR WITHOUT MEMBERSHIP ALERTS, OR THROUGH A BILATERAL AGREEMENT WITH A SMALL NUMBER OF PRE- IDENTIFIED MEMBER AGENCIES WITH RAPID RESEARCH DEPLOYMENT CAPACITY (REACH, ACAPS, ETC)

RECOMMENDATION 13: EXPLORE HOW RECOMMENDATIONS MADE IN OTHER EVALUATIONS CAN BE APPLIED TO SIMPLIFY LOW VALUE ALLOCATION PROCESSES (E.G. THROUGH A ‘NO OBJECTIONS’ ALLOCATION PROCESS)

WHICH ‘NICHE’ SHOULD START NETWORK FAVOUR REGARDING MIGRATION AND START NETWORK’S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE “NEXUS” QUESTIONS CONCERNING WHAT CONSTITUTES AN EMERGENCY RESPONSE IN AN AMBIVALENT CONTEXT

• KEY FINDING: Start Network offers highly valued contingency funds
• KEY FINDING: Start Network’s specialised fund for migration is a source of strategic tension
• KEY FINDING: Where MERF plays a similar emergency function to the Start Fund, the Start Fund would suffice. However, MERF’s experiences have highlighted the chronic structural gaps and neglected crises in migration response more broadly in a way that Start Fund could not / would not have responded to.
• KEY FINDING: There are clear examples of where MERF fulfilled both of Start’s ‘niche’ roles of a) complementary funding and b) highlighting structural funding gaps in responding to under-served / neglected emergencies in MERF 1 and MERF 2
• KEY FINDING: Humanitarian needs in chronic, underserved or under the radar crises are often harder to isolate and address through standard humanitarian assistance responses. This is typically the case in mixed migration contexts.

RECOMMENDATION 14: START NETWORK SHOULD EXPLORE HOW ANY FUTURE EARMARKED FUNDING FOR MIGRATION RESPONSE COULD FOCUS ON THE SECOND NICHE ONLY: UNDERSERVED AND CHRONIC CRISSES. THIS INCLUDES A DEDICATED INSTRUMENT OR AT REGIONAL LEVELS AS PART OF DECENTRALISED ‘PACKAGES’. ANY EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO MIGRATION UNDER THE FIRST NICHE (COMPLEMENTING EXISTING HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES) WOULD THEN REMAIN UNDER THE START FUND. IN SO DOING, START FUND SHOULD EXPLORE HOW TO EFFECTIVELY MAINSTREAM RELEVANT LEARNING FROM MERF’S EXPERIENCES INTO START FUND MIGRATION RESPONSES MORE BROADLY.

RECOMMENDATION 15: DECISION-MAKING ON ALERTS AND ALLOCATIONS IN CHRONIC, UNDERSERVED OR UNDER THE RADAR CONTEXTS SUCH AS IN CHRONIC MIXED MIGRATION SETTINGS MUST BE HEAVILY CONTEXTUALIZED WITH APPROPRIATE AND SPECIALIZED REPRESENTATION ON ALLOCATION COMMITTEES. START NETWORK SHOULD CONSIDER WHETHER LOCAL PARTNERS CAN PARTICIPATE THROUGHOUT THE ALERT PROCESS — AND HOW TO ADDRESS OBSTACLES TO THIS — WITH A VIEW TO SUPPORTING RELEVANT CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS TO INFORM DECISION-MAKING.

RECOMMENDATION 16: START NETWORK SHOULD MOVE FORWARD WITH RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE 2019 STUDY ON ‘UNDER THE RADAR CRISIS’, PARTICULARLY WITH REGARD TO (1) THE CREATION OF INTERNAL CRITERIA, DEFINITION AND CATEGORISATION OF SUCH CRISIS, AND (2) THE INTERNAL PRIORITISATION AND BALANCE BETWEEN NICHE. TAKING INTO ACCOUNT LEARNING FROM MERF TO ENSURE SUCH CATEGORISATION INCLUDES MIXED MIGRATION CONTEXTS
RECOMMENDATION 17: REVIEW WHETHER PROTECTION NEEDS ARE SOMETHING START MEMBERS WANT TO BE ABLE TO SUPPORT IN FUTURE AT RISK OF COMPROMISING START FUND’S STRUCTURE (45-DAY WINDOW). SIMILARLY, EXPLORE WHETHER THE CRISIS ANTICIPATION WINDOW COULD BE USED TO BETTER ENGAGE WITH PROTECTION ISSUES THROUGH A ‘PREVENTION’ APPROACH: NOT PREVENTION OF MIGRATION, BUT PREVENTION OF CHOICES OF NEGATIVE COPING MECHANISM OF WHICH DANGEROUS/ILLEGAL MIGRATION.

RECOMMENDATION 18: CONSIDER HOW – AND WHETHER – START NETWORK WISHES TO SUPPORT PROACTIVE MEMBER ADVOCACY GOING FORWARD AS ONE MEANS OF STRADDLING THE ‘NEXUS’, BEYOND THE OPERATIONAL EMERGENCY WINDOW. THIS IS PARTICULARLY RELEVANT IF START NETWORK HAS A REGIONAL OR COUNTRY PRESENCE PLAYING A FORMAL OR INFORMAL COORDINATION ROLE, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT MERF EXPERIENCES IN BUILDING A COMMON NARRATIVE THROUGH SHARED ANALYSIS.