Twenty-five years of Experimentation and Innovation:

Quality, Social and Environmental Concerns in Relief Items Procurement

June 10th and 11th, 2024 at Fordham University, New York City

Conference Report

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1. Executive Summary

This report summarizes presentations and discussions from a two-day conference on humanitarian aid procurement and sustainability co-hosted by the International Organization for Migration and Fordham University in June 2024. The event brought together representatives from the QSE Working Group and other aid organizations, from academia and the private sector to explore challenges, opportunities, and discuss potential ways forward in improving the efficiency, sustainability, and quality of humanitarian aid delivery of key relief items (i.e., tarpaulins, jerrycans, tents, kitchen sets, floor mats, buckets, blankets, mosquito nets).

The QSE Working Group has been meeting since 2010 and includes six major humanitarian organizations: ICRC, IFRC, IOM, MSF, UNHCR, and UNICEF. For the first time, the working group opened representation to include USAID-BHA, WFP and NGOs such as CARE, Catholic Relief Services, and Oxfam. The conference was also open to academia and humanitarian workers and drew in engagement from the Fordham community.

The primary themes of the conference were:

1. Unified Technical Specifications and Harmonization
2. Sustainability and Environmental Considerations
3. Local Procurement and Market Shaping
4. Quality Control and Inspection Services
5. Innovation and Future Directions

In addition to panels and breakout discussions on the primary themes, the conference had presentations to provide insights on specific projects. These included on the evolution toward the "Jerry Bucket" water container product from Oxfam, the sustainability issues around long-lasting insecticidal nets (LLIN) from UNICEF, the Eco-designed tarpaulin from ICRC, and a case study on recycling for plastic sheeting production in Indonesia from USAID-BHA.

The discussions underscored the importance of a holistic approach to improving humanitarian aid procurement and sustainability. Participants emphasized the need for continued collaboration, innovation, and a balanced approach to sustainability that considers cost-effectiveness, quality, and environmental impact. This includes harmonizing specifications across agencies, investing in local capacity building and specifically manufacturer's capacity building, improving quality control processes, and fostering innovation throughout the supply chain. By addressing these interconnected challenges, the humanitarian sector can work towards more effective, efficient, and sustainable aid delivery that better serves those in need while minimizing environmental impact.

Conference participants display and discuss the specifications of a USAID tarpaulin

2. Participant's list

Name	Job Title	Organization
Dilip Niroula	Regional Manager	CARE
Joanne Rivera	Global Procurement Lead	CARE
Michael Hatch	Emergency Operations Technical Advisor	Catholic Relief Services
Jamaal Orr	Student	CUNY
Mark Quinn	N/A	FCDO - online
Connor Larson	Fordham Notetaker	Fordham University
Holly Curtis	Assistant Provost for Corporate Relations	Fordham University
Lauren Larsen	Undergraduate student	Fordham University
Mya L.	N/A	Fordham University
Paula Scardino	Adjunct Professor	Fordham University
Yagmur Karakuyu	Student	Fordham University
Brendan Cahill	Executive Director	Fordham University, IIHA
James M. Stillwaggon	Professor	Fordham University, IIHA
Jane Ruby	IIHA Fordham Intern	Fordham University, IIHA
Pierrette Quintiliani	Humanitarian Studies Professor	Fordham University, IIHA
Ruth Mukwana	Helen Hamlyn Senior Fellow	Fordham University, IIHA
Summer Lily Egan	Communications Officer for IIHA	Fordham University, IIHA
Meg McLaughlin	Founder	GRIT Strategies
Marciana Popescu	Professor	GSS
Daniel Starosta	disaster resilience lead	Hawai'i pacific advisory group
Marie	Coordinator	IAPG - online
Afshin Amini	Quality Manager	ICRC
Carmen Garcia Duro	Sustainable Supply Chain project manager	ICRC
Hui LIU	EHI Global Lead Buyer	ICRC
Otaegui Marie	Former Sourcing Manager ICRC	ICRC
Zhi Ying Emily Zhang	Senior Global Strategic Sourcing Officer	IFRC
Juan Galvez Paniagua	Global Lead, Supply Chain Environmental Sustainability	IFRC
Abdul Baseer Khan	Shelter and Non Food Items Pipeline Manager	IOM
Charlotte Kropf	Program Support Intern	IOM

Daud Shad	IOM Program Intern	IOM
Ibrahim Marte	Programme Coordinator Shelter, settlement, WASH, & CBI	IOM
Ilyas Masih	Head (Manila Supply Chain Unit)	IOM
Jessica Pugal	Quality Assurance and Control Specialist	IOM
Joseph Ashmore	Head Preparedness and response coordination support unit	IOM
Nuno Nunes	Consultant	IOM
Patrick Oger	project manager	IOM
Taylor Raeburn-Gibson	S/NFI Pipeline Coordinator	IOM
Trevor Atchison	Project Assistant	IOM
Victoria Powell	Project Assistant, Shelter and Settlements	IOM
Takuya Ono	Senior Shelter and Settlements Officer	IOM
Bourdais, Eric	Senior Purchaser	Médecins Sans Frontières
Stella Rose	Youth Advisor/Student	Nuclear Age Peace Foundation
Rupert Gill	Equipment Quality and Development Manager	Oxfam
Daniel Allemann	Logistics specialist	Swiss Red Cross - online
Kamilla Peter	National Procurement Officer	UNHCR
Lina Santana Chilra	Supply Officer (Quality Assurance)	UNHCR
Diana Connett	Sustainability Market Research Manager	UNICEF
Naveed Ahmad	Supply Chain Specialist	UNICEF
Stuart Turner	QA and Regulatory Specialist	UNICEF
Greg Rulifson	Senior Humanitarian Sustainability Advisor	USAID
John Zavales	Shelter and Settlements Advisor	USAID/BHA
Pablo Bredt Torres	Humanitarian Supply Chain Team Lead	USAID/BHA
Carlotta Negri	Programme Officer at UN CERF	WFP/Global Logistics Cluster

3. Welcome and Introduction

Brendan Cahill, Director of the Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs at Fordham University introduced the conference with a long term vision and a wide view angle touching all fields of collaboration and potential partnership between academia, industry and humanitarian aid organizations. Brendan recalled that even though the conference is about technologies, R&D, or procurement, the essential of our action is about human dignity, for the people we serve as humanitarian actors.

John Zavales, Shelter and Settlements Advisor at USAID/BHA, Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance, continued the introduction of the conference, with special focus on the environmental sustainability of the humanitarian assistance, the essential role of effective logistics structures, the localization of action sources, and the critical role of the QSE group in the formalization of the quality, social and environmental approach in the supply chain.

LEFT: Breakout group discussions allowed participants to interrogate conference themes and trends.

RIGHT: A panel presentation fosters a range of perspectives on local procurement practices.

4. Thematics

4.1. Unified Technical Specification and Harmonization

Presentation describes the consolidated work done by the QSE group on technical specification. At all steps of the supply chain, the detailed technical specification serve as a unique reference to ensure the required products will be purchased and controlled as per the original requirements, and timely delivered to the assisted population.

The importance of unifying technical specifications (i.e. harmonization) across agencies that are primary purchasers of relief items was emphasized. Key products like tarpaulins, tents, kitchen sets, blankets, or water storage buckets and jerrycans have been, or are harmonizing in the sector. The process of harmonization creates a common reference across organizations, helping in negotiations with manufacturers and ensuring products meet the required standards and best practices.

The evolution of plastic tarpaulins was highlighted, tracing their development from simple black plastic film in the 70's to more durable and UV-resistant material. In addition, harmonization efforts between agencies such as MSF, the Red Cross, UNHCR and UNICEF have led to increased purchasing power and lower costs for key commodities. The current focus of harmonization is on creating extremely durable plastic tarpaulins and other items to reduce overall plastic consumption.

Challenges in harmonization include varying approaches to aid distribution among organizations, difficulties in collecting and aligning user's feedback, and industry-wide resistance to change or difficulties to understand our needs. The group also discussed the potential for a shared online catalog for common technical specifications, which could further streamline procurement processes and enhance inter-agency collaboration.

4.2. Sustainability and Environmental Considerations

Even though there were already present at the start of the QSE group activity, the Sustainability and Social criteria have taken more importance in the last years.

Sustainability emerged as a key theme across almost every discussion. Organizations presented their visions, detailing efforts to reduce environmental footprint by using recycled materials in various aid items. Examples include UNHCR greenhouse gases emission reduced by 70'000 tons by 2025 for the main twelve core relief items, that is 30% reduction, UNICEF reporting a significant increase in sustainable procurement practices, and MSF's commitment to reducing their carbon footprint by at least 50% by 2030, among every organization's efforts.

Inter-agency collaboration on sustainability was emphasized, with joint projects on eco-design tarpaulins, recycled blankets, and geodesic tents. Future collaborations may include packaging, clean energy systems, and further research into recycled plastics. The group discussed the potential for developing biodegradable mosquito nets and increasing the use of recycled materials in production. It was noted throughout the discussions that recycled materials are often more expensive and may be of a lesser quality than non-recycled materials.

USAID-BHA presented its comprehensive strategy to reduce environmental impact and integrate climate resilience into operations and programming. This includes greening procurement practices, gradually including sustainability requirements in funding opportunities, and developing new funding mechanisms targeted at environmental programs. The agency's efforts extend to both internal operations and external programming, striving to create a more environmentally conscious and efficient aid delivery system.

Challenges in using recycled materials were discussed, including quality concerns, the impact on the informal economy, and the difficulty in verifying recycled content. A case study on plastic sheeting production in Indonesia highlighted these challenges, revealing that the main obstacle is the low segregation rates of plastic waste, leading to poor quality "feedstock" for recycling. Participants emphasized the need for improved waste segregation and recycling infrastructure in developing countries to address these issues and promote industry-wide sustainability practices.

4.3. Local Procurement and Market Shaping

Local procurement was discussed as a potential strategy for reducing environmental impact and supporting local economies. However, participants uncomfortably noted that local procurement is not always more socially or environmentally friendly than buying from abroad. As an example, poor quality control and sustainability practices in underdeveloped manufacturing locations can contribute to a higher environmental impact than simply procuring from more established manufacturers abroad. Other challenges include limited capacity and demand in local markets, lack of quality control and oversight, and misunderstandings between local and international buyers/sellers.

Strategies for facilitating local procurement were proposed, including "Proximity Sourcing" to be as close as possible to beneficiaries while maintaining procurement standards and a four-step process involving mapping suppliers, market assessment, market engagement, and procurement strategy development. Participants also discussed the importance of market shaping, capacity building for local suppliers, and simplifying tender documentation to encourage local participation.

The group shared experiences from different regions, where aid agencies' flooding of markets has hindered growth in other sectors. The importance of coaching and networking between buyers and sellers was emphasized, as well as addressing the challenge of raw material availability in several aid-receiving regions. UNICEF shared its experience of increased local procurement, primarily for WASH and education supplies, while noting that emergency products are still mostly sourced offshore.

4.4. Quality Control and Inspection Services

The QSE group collaboration on harmonized specifications made possible the harmonization of the standard operating procedures for Quality. This is already operational in the ten Quality Control Centers operated by UNHCR, IOM, IFRC and ICRC.

The critical role of inspection companies and laboratories in humanitarian aid procurement was emphasized. Participants stressed the importance of accreditation for these entities and the need for thorough assessment of inspection companies and laboratories. It was stressed that even well-known brands can have inconsistent quality across different locations, and that oversight is key to successful inspection.

The discussion extended to the challenges of selecting the right inspection companies, including considerations of their accreditation, competency, range of activities, capacity, geographical coverage, and use of subcontractors. Participants also highlighted the importance of availability, cost, and turnaround time in making these selections. For established frame agreement suppliers, a trust-based approach with random testing was suggested, while the use of reference laboratories and global laboratory mapping was proposed to ensure consistent quality control across different regions.

The group also discussed the potential for sharing audit results and resources among humanitarian organizations to reduce costs and improve overall quality control. The importance of transparency in the audit process was emphasized, along with the need for clear communication about reasons for rejections or concerns. Some participants suggested including penalty clauses in contracts with inspection companies for non-compliance or poor performance.

4.5. Innovation and Future Directions

As part of the harmonization work, several products were specifically designed through Research and Development projects for the usage of the humanitarian aid organizations.

Discussions on innovation focused on distinguishing between true innovation and problem-solving, with an emphasis on the importance of collaboration with suppliers. User feedback was identified as a critical area for innovation, with suggestions including the use of QR codes to improve review and input mechanisms. The group placed significant importance on working with universities like Fordham to drive innovation in this area and the sector more broadly.

Rupert exposed the entire design process for the Oxfam Bucket, now called Jerry Bucket. The product was created in the 90's as a portable water storage, easy to transport due to its stackability, and more efficient than a traditional jerrycan in terms of cleanability and durability. Recently the Oxfam Bucket was further improved with a new design of the clip on cover that does not allow removal of the cover, and with a larger spout to facilitate filling the Jerry Bucket without wasting water, and access to the inside for cleaning.

Stuart made a comprehensive presentation of the Long Lasting Insecticidal bed nets (LLINs). The development of those specifically designed bed nets played a transformative role in public health by significantly reducing malaria cases. The product evolution was coupled with sustainable manufacturing practices. Future advancements should prioritize sustainability to ensure LLINs remain effective and eco-friendly solution in the global fight against malaria.

Participants explored ways to broaden the definition of innovation, recognizing that internal changes within organizations can be highly innovative but often go uncelebrated. The potential for project-based learning emerged as a valuable approach for advancing sustainability initiatives in the sector. The group also discussed the challenges of balancing innovation with the immediate needs of crisis response, emphasizing the need for a careful approach that doesn't compromise the quality or timeliness of aid delivery.

Next steps discussed included developing more sustainable packaging solutions, enhancing durability to extend product lifespan, and encouraging local production to reduce logistics costs and carbon footprints. The group also emphasized the need for continued research and development in areas such as biodegradable materials, improved insecticide formulations for bed nets, and smart technologies for monitoring aid distribution and usage.

5. Conclusion of the conference

The conference outcome highlighted the complex challenges facing humanitarian aid procurement and sustainability efforts. Participants emphasized the need for continued collaboration, innovation, and a balanced approach to sustainability that considers cost-effectiveness, quality, and environmental impact. As the sector moves forward, integrating these considerations into all aspects of humanitarian aid delivery will be crucial for creating a more efficient, sustainable, and impactful approach to serving the needs crisis-affected populations.

Overall, there was strong support for this conference and strong interest in repeat events in the future to broaden the engagement and impacts of the working group.

6. Annexes

6.1. Conference Program Schedule

Monday, June 10, 2024:
Presentation I – Unified Technical Specifications: Harmonization and Standardisation
Speaker -- Patrick Oger, ICRC/IOM

Presentation II – The Oxfam Bucket
Speaker – Rupert Gill, Oxfam

Presentation III – Long Lasting Insecticidal Nets
Speaker – Stuart Turner, UNICEF

Presentation IV: Harmonized Specification Across Agencies
Speaker(s) – Patrick Oger, ICRC/IOM and Joseph Ashmore, IOM

Presentation V: Sustainability and Social Criteria
Speaker – Lina Santana Chilra, UNHCR

Breakout Group Session: Participants select one of four groups for a roundtable discussion
Groups – (1) Innovation, (2) Local Procurement, (3) Sustainability, (4) Quality Control

Presentation VI: QSE Integrated Management System
Speaker – Afshin Amini, ICRC

Tuesday, June 11, 2024:
Presentation VII: Local Procurement Panel
Speaker(s): Juan Galvez, IFRC; Naveed Ahmad, UNICEF; Carmen Garcia, ICRC;
Lina Santana Chilra, UNHCR; Marie Otaegui, ICRC.

Breakout Group Session: Participants select one of four groups for a roundtable discussion
Groups – (1) Innovation, (2) Local Procurement, (3) Sustainability, (4) Quality Control

Presentation VIII: USAID Standpoint on QSE
Speaker(s): Pablo Torres, USAID and John Zavales, USAID

Breakout Group Session: Participants select one of four groups for a roundtable discussion
Groups – (1) Innovation, (2) Local Procurement, (3) Sustainability, (4) Quality Control

Reflections from Each Breakout Group Session
Groups – (1) Innovation, (2) Local Procurement, (3) Sustainability, (4) Quality Control

Conclusion of Conference
Speaker(s): Summer Lily Egan, IIHA; Joseph Ashmore, IOM and Patrick Oger, IOM

6.2. Fordham University survey

Conference attendees' feedback:

Are you new to the QSE working group?	70% yes; 30% no
How did you find out about the conference (in decreasing order)?	IOM, IIHA, Invitation, a colleague, Patrick, Oxfam technical lead.
What parts of the conference should we continue for next year?	Breakout groups, Sustainability, Sharing achievements and updates, Technical innovation, All of it.
What are the areas that can be improved upon for the next conference?	Encourage other donors to attend
	Participation of participants out of QSE group
	One more half day, site visit, student and/or professor presentations
	Information sharing and follow through of the actions and progress
	More pre reading and prep materials on the themes of conference
	More presentation of other NGOs and donors
	To set up a (partial) inspection test as an exercise when we have guests.
	More breakout sessions/panels rather that presentation
Should future QSE conferences be all in-person, virtual, or hybrid (similar to this year)?	0 votes for completely online 4 votes for hybrid 18 votes for in person In-person is much more impactful

6.3. Action Items

6.3.1. Unified Technical Specifications and Harmonization

1. Consider how to better incorporate feedback from affected people as well as field staff into technical specifications.
2. Develop improved guidance for quality control in local procurement
3. Explore the possibility of a shared online catalog for common technical specifications.
4. Continue research on increasing the use of recycled plastic content in sheeting production.
5. Align factory audit tools to properly assess recycled plastic content claims.
6. Continue conversation on the technical challenges of demonstrating recycled plastic content.

6.3.2. Sustainability and Environmental Considerations

1. Share factory audit tools and results between agencies.
2. Launch procurement tenders for recycled blankets and other items by the end of 2024.
3. Organize factory visits in September 2024 to monitor suppliers using new audit tools.
4. Develop proximity sourcing initiatives to reduce carbon footprint and support local economies.
5. Continue research on recycled vs. recyclable plastics and how to ensure quality while promoting their use.

5.1.1. Local Procurement and Market Shaping

1. Share supplier lists publicly to improve information access for prospective suppliers.
2. Leverage due diligence assessments conducted by other organizations.
3. Mitigate supplier fatigue, especially for smaller suppliers, including pre-qualifying suppliers to build efficiency while maintaining quality control.

3.1.1. Quality Control and Inspection Services

1. Schedule the next round of supplier audits and assessments.
2. Update the quality control center map.
3. Organize biannual training sessions across agencies on quality management and supplier assessments.
4. Continue collaboration on joint procurement, research, and auditing to further reduce costs.

3.1.2. Innovation and Future Directions

1. Continue building supplier relationships to foster deeper innovation to improve product design, production, and distribution.
2. Identify key areas of academic collaboration with relevant universities.
3. Expand user feedback mechanisms to inform procurement needs and practices.

6.4. Links to documents (to complete)

Videos

Presentations