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Challenges and adaptive strategies: Turning procurement and grant making into possibility

Three lessons for effective procurement in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS).

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Promoting innovative solutions Supporting livelihoods and markets Understanding land and conflict Working in a changing climate Gender equality and social inclusion Global

Procurement was never only about buying goods and services when SPARC began its work in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS). It was about enabling research and resilience in places where systems falter, risks multiply, and time is never on your side.

As SPARC closes, in the first of two blogs, we want to share how the programme's adaptive procurement has helped deliver meaningful results in challenging contexts, and what lessons have emerged that donors and practitioners can carry forward.

Procurement challenges in FCAS

Procurement in FCAS is inherently challenging. Limited supplier markets, complex security and financial risks, and intensive due diligence requirements often deter international organisations from engaging in these contexts.

It was clear from the start of the SPARC programme that 'business as usual' wouldn't work. In FCAS, every decision carries weight: a delay can derail research; a rigid process can exclude local actors; a missed risk can endanger lives, while procurement rigour is vital to counter inherent fraud risks associated with FCAS contexts. We understood this reality early and developed procurement processes that would enable local partners not hinder them.

Bombed Royal Palace, Kabul, Afghanistan – Image by Tahirshah999 - CC BY-SA 4.0 – Wikicommons media

Flexibility and responsiveness

Standard procurement models often fall short in FCAS. Local organisations face considerable challenges in accessing funds. Once research begins, carefully crafted plans need adapting to unpredictable events.

SPARC gradually refined and simplified administrative requirements to improve accessibility for local organisations. Overall, we supported 20 national partners to deliver impactful research interventions in challenging contexts, including Sudan, Afghanistan, and Somalia. We used different procurement models to suit different contexts and partners. For example, competitive calls for proposals were suitable for established partners in Kenya and Northern Nigeria while 'talent scouting' led to sole source procurement in Syria and Yemen.

Some less established partners faced challenges with providing standard documentation for due diligence, and SPARC adapted by accepting alternative documents that provided other entry points for compliance checks, whilst maintaining necessary standards. In such cases, for example, we accepted certified financial statements in place of audited accounts.

Because FCAS environments are often unpredictable, flexibility and responsiveness were also essential during research implementation. SPARC recognised that typical contract management, which can make adjusting budgets, methods, and outputs administratively

burdensome, would not be effective. Our contracts were agile, allowing for changes in scope, budget, and timelines in response to evolving conditions. We found that milestone-based contracts could effectively balance this flexibility with accountability.

A Somali goat herder in the village of Belet Weyne – Image by Sgt. G. D. Robinson DoD photo, USA ID: DFST9804803 - Public domain – Wikicommons media

A partner-centred approach to knowledge creation

FCAS researchers face challenges beyond just funding. They can struggle for their ideas to be heard and shape debates, and to develop their skills and networks.

A key justification for SPARC's research is that FCAS drylands are understudied, and the design of humanitarian interventions are rarely informed by the knowledge of local people. For us, working with local partners was an obvious counter to this tendency. Inevitably, each partner's deep, contextual knowledge enriched SPARC's research and evidence.

Engaging local actors early in the design phase of consortium-led research interventions ensured these activities were locally relevant and locally owned. Our 11 locally-led research interventions - including work in Chad, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, and northern Nigeria - took this a step further, with local partners identifying the fundamental questions and objectives guiding the research. This regularly generated fresh insights and perspectives. Our partners in Yemen, for example, were excited by the chance to pursue research questions that were of high relevance to the local context but that did not seem to align with the priorities of other donors working in the country.

We paired local researchers with SPARC experts for technical advice and mentoring. In

addition, SPARC offered targeted support on gender equality and social inclusion (GESI), leading to publications highlighting [lessons for research funders on supporting women's empowerment through locally-led research](). SPARC also provided training to partners on procurement tools and processes, strengthening their ability to manage complex projects in the future. We also fostered peer-learning and collaboration through workshops and forums, contributing to a community of practice.

Young woman who lives in the remote village on Socotra Island, Yemen – Image by [Andrew Svk](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Risk management

Working in FCAS can pose significant risks. Researchers are often exposed to violence, road traffic accidents, floods, and other physical risks to their safety. SPARC required local partners to develop security risk management plans and provided support through a Security Risk Manager and access to real-time security intelligence services, such as Crisis 24.

Our contract management system enabled teams to react appropriately to changing security situations. For example, in December 2024 [our partners' work in Syria](#) was paused for four weeks to reduce uncertainty after the fall of the Assad regime. At the programmatic level, SPARC could absorb such events because proactive contingency planning and adaptive management allowed us to balance delays in one intervention by bringing others forward, keeping overall budget spend on track.

FCAS pose another challenge for international organisations and funders, which are responsible for funds being used appropriately and in compliance with donor requirements. When doing due diligence, we used tools like Refinitiv World-Check, a risk intelligence database, in conjunction with our local networks to screen partners, assess risks, and ensure compliance. On more than one occasion when our intelligence tools and services flagged a potential partner and a follow-up local investigation provided confirmation; SPARC made an informed decision not to engage further.

Adaptive procurement in fragile contexts: Summary of lessons from SPARC's collaborative approach

Job Eronmhonsele, Executive Director at one of the SPARC partners the Centre for Population and Environmental Development ([CPED](#)) in Nigeria, summarises the cumulative effect of these strategies for his team saying: "SPARC's procurement support made our processes and project implementation more transparent, structured, and responsive. Regular reviews kept delivery on track. SPARC's emphasis on adaptive procurement - scenario planning, the localisation of teams, rapid approvals of request where needed, and continuous learning especially through the various sessions organised for project team and partners - helped us operate confidently in a security-sensitive context and maintain research quality despite external shocks."

SPARC has demonstrated that effective procurement in fragile contexts is possible. By focusing on adaptive strategies, building strong partnerships, and championing local leadership, programmes can achieve meaningful results even in the most challenging environments.

However, as we discuss in the second blog in this series '[The power of trust: A cornerstone for success in fragile contexts](#)', the fundamental factor that allowed these strategies to succeed was our principle of investing in relationships, not just processes. Building trust with local partners enables faster problem-solving, better risk management, and more resilient delivery models.

- Procurement and grantmaking are used interchangeably in this blog.
- Talent scouting is a proactive approach that SPARC used to identify and engage promising individuals or organisations—often in fragile contexts—where formal calls for proposals were not possible. This meant SPARC sourced expertise and innovation through informal networks, recommendations, or prior knowledge, leading to sole-source procurement where competitive processes were not feasible.

This blog forms part of a wider series of SPARC's learnings about how to conduct research more effectively in fragile contexts. Please see our accompanying blogs on: the [need to reframe aid narratives in protracted crises](#); [learning while working in fragile and conflict contexts](#); [how to conduct meaningful research in fragile contexts](#); and the importance of [building strong relationships and trust](#).

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