

# Humanitarian Innovation Fund

Case Study

## Gaza Risk Reduction and Mitigation

**Organisation:** Catholic Relief Services

**Project:** Gaza Risk Reduction and Mitigation

**Partner:** Palestinian Red Crescent Society

**Start Date:** October 2011

**Grant Period:** 17 Months

**Total HIF Budget:** £ 149,285 (total budget £180,000)

**Location:** Gaza Strip

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### Summary

This case study explores the recent innovations made by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in its approach to providing assistance to vulnerable urban populations in the Gaza Strip. Its Gaza Risk Reduction and Mitigation (GRRAM) project, implemented through the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS), reflects an approach to disaster risk reduction (DRR) that seeks to take into account the full and complex range of hazards in this unique humanitarian context, and the presence of non-state actors in de facto control of the territory. CRS sought to develop a DRR project model that used participatory approaches to identify and address natural hazards as well as conflict risk, and sought to help communities develop their own mitigation strategies in a context where NGO actors could not work through local authorities. The GRRAM project received funding from the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) to develop the approach further and pilot it with a small number of communities.

The case study briefly explores the challenges facing Gaza's population and humanitarian agencies involved in response. It then describes

how CRS staff distilled these particular programming challenges, before exploring the innovations they made through the GRRAM project. It examines the nature and range of partnerships and collaborations that were formed, and describes how CRS undertook the process of adapting existing knowledge and practice. It concludes by discussing the wider implications of the project for others interested in innovation in five key areas: the nature and shape of collaboration; the role of established knowledge and practice; risk and risk management; the modes and timing of diffusion; and the challenges of demonstrating the outcomes and impact of ongoing innovation projects.

The research for this study is based on a review of the project literature, interviews with current and former project staff and partners in Jerusalem and Gaza, as well as focus group research with participating communities conducted in October 2012. This case study is part of a series produced by HIF that explores how agencies which have received HIF grants have undertaken innovation processes in humanitarian practice.

# The Innovation Process

**Invention** of a creative solution, or novel idea, which helps address a problem or seize an opportunity.

**Invention**

**Development** of an innovation by creating practical, actionable plans and guidelines.

**Development**

**Diffusion** of successful innovations - taking them to scale and leading to wider adoption outside the original setting.

**Diffusion**

**Recognition**

**Recognition** of a specific problem, challenge, or opportunity to be seized, in relation to the provision of humanitarian aid.

**Implementation**

**Implementation** of an innovation to produce real examples of changed practice, testing the innovation to see how it compares to existing solutions.

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## Context

The political, economic, demographic and humanitarian challenges facing Gaza make it a unique context, inextricably linked to the ongoing conflict with Israel and the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. Ongoing instability, punctuated by periodic intensifications of the conflict, have taken a heavy toll on the civilian population, undermining development efforts and resulting in acute and protracted humanitarian needs.

The rise of Hamas in Gaza and the subsequent international response has dramatically altered political realities and had a profound effect on the operating environment for humanitarian agencies. Since 2006, restrictions on the movement of people and goods across Gaza's borders have intensified, placing even tighter constraints on agency operations. And with Hamas designated a terrorist organisation by the USA and the EU, the 'no contact' policy of these major donors has created a range of operational challenges for the agencies and programmes they fund.

CRS has been operating in Gaza and the West Bank for more than 50 years, supporting the population through disaster response, food distribution, and initiatives to promote peace-building and strengthen civil society. These recent political constraints have presented considerable challenges for implementation of its core programmes, prompting the organisation (first at field level then more broadly) to review how best to provide support to vulnerable communities.



*Photo taken by Katie Orlinsky for Catholic Relief Services of area in Gaza*

Despite their unpredictable and dynamic nature, there are often similarities in the stages through which successful innovations progress. It is therefore useful to understand the innovation process when trying to capture why particular innovations succeed or fail. There are various models to describe the innovation process, but HIF uses a model that is based on five stages:

- the *recognition* of a specific problem or challenge
- the *invention* of a creative solution or novel idea that addresses a problem or seizes an opportunity
- the *development* of the innovation by creating practical, actionable plans and guidelines
- the *implementation* of the innovation to produce real examples of change, testing it to see how it compares with existing solutions
- the *diffusion* of successful innovations – taking them to scale and promoting their wider adoption.<sup>1</sup>

CRS’s GRRAM project represents a deliberate attempt by the agency to re-imagine risk reduction strategies appropriate for the unique political and humanitarian context in Gaza. Despite its long history of working in the area, it took a change in the operating context – specifically the uneasy calm that followed Israel’s ‘Operation Cast Lead’ in 2008-9 – to open up space for a new conceptualisation of the challenges facing vulnerable urban populations, and to start the process of creating a new approach to addressing them.

These five steps provide a useful archetype for the innovation process, and are used in the HIF case study methodology. But they come with the caveat that innovation is complex and non-linear, and identifying deviations from this model is just as important (and possibly more so) than confirming the applicability of the model itself when documenting the progression of an innovation.

*Recognition of a specific problem or challenge*

Despite the relative calm that ensued after the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, CRS recognised the increasing fragility of the operational environment, demonstrated by the outbreak of fighting between Hamas and Salafist forces in August 2010. It was mindful that its activities would be curtailed if there was an escalation of internal or cross-border violence, and also recalled the unease with which many NGOs (whether focused on development or human rights) had adapted to the emergency response paradigm in the aftermath of the fighting.

More broadly, many agencies in Gaza felt that in the highly politicised and contested environment of Gaza, humanitarian actors should be aiming to do more than just provide an immediate response to ongoing needs, despite the significant operational constraints and the challenges involved in upholding humanitarian principles. While CRS was not new to using the DRR approach, its staff in Gaza felt somewhat daunted by the nature of risk and the range of potential hazards, and the seemingly limited range of solutions.

<sup>1</sup> Ramalingam B, Scriven K and Foley C (2009) ‘Innovations in international humanitarian action’ in ALNAP 8th Review of Humanitarian Action: Performance, Impact and Innovation. London: Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP). Available at: [www.alnap.org/pool/files/8rhach3.pdf](http://www.alnap.org/pool/files/8rhach3.pdf)

Engaging with this challenge began to be seen internally as a strategic opportunity for CRS. Developing programmes that were more effective throughout the crisis cycle, and that had risk reduction and mitigation at their core, offered the chance to boost the agency’s profile and reputation and make it the ‘go to’ humanitarian NGO operating in Gaza. It was at this point in GRRAM’s evolution that the innovation process began to move from the stage of recognising the problem to the stage of inventing a solution.



*Most of the identified DRR urban areas of GRRAM beneficiaries are vulnerable neighbourhoods where many target group members are relatives from the same extended families. This photo was taken in Khan Younis in the south area of Gaza Strip.*

*Invention of a creative solution*

At the heart of the innovation behind GRRAM, CRS sought to develop a viable model for designing and implementing DRR projects that took into account the urban context of Gaza and the presence of non-state actors in de facto control of the territory. It wanted to focus on using participatory methods to identify and address risk, and to help communities develop their own mitigation strategies in a context where NGO actors could not work through local authorities. But it seemed that much of the experience already gained through DRR policy and practice in other contexts – mostly rural areas, where the focus is on working with state structures to address risks primarily arising from natural hazards – would be less helpful for adopting a DRR approach in Gaza and other urban conflict environments.

To help bridge this gap, CRS brought together and consulted the widest possible range of organisations and individuals who might have valuable insights and information to share. This dialogue took place at two levels: through formal

interactions with academic and other institutions, and informal opportunities for individuals to meet to share ideas and experiences. CRS made formal approaches to local institutions with relevant expertise (for instance, academics working in the earth sciences and seismic engineering department at An Najah National University in the West Bank). At the same time, international staff from a range of agencies based in Jerusalem began to meet informally for weekend ‘coffee mornings’ to discuss problems and ideas. At this stage, the purpose of these gatherings was to exchange ideas, rather than to seek formal collaborations or partnerships.

However, these informal discussions to share ideas proved to be particularly important. Ian De La Rosa, then CRS Deputy Country Representative, recalled how they created a certain excitement and buzz, and a sense that this group was the space in which creative solutions were being formulated. This perception was important both for the creative energy inside the group, and for the image it projected

outwards, raising the DRR profile in Gaza, within CRS, and more broadly. It was also a practical response, as many of those working with international agencies could only be involved in an unofficial capacity in order to protect their neutrality in this highly politicised environment.

At the same time, the need to undertake new types of risk reduction programming in Gaza and the discussions around what was possible were gaining more attention within CRS, with managers at the regional level and beyond taking an interest. Fortuitously, the CRS team in Gaza became aware of the possibility of applying for HIF funding around about this time. This in turn led to a more systematic approach to articulating the ideas behind the GRRAM project, including a literature review and the development of a 'learning agenda' that would underpin the development phase.

When considering CRS's application, the HIF Grants Panel was particularly impressed by the extent to which CRS had consulted relevant stakeholders operating in the area, and drawn on literature to ground the thinking behind the innovation. The GRRAM project was provided HIF funding in October 2011 as part of the first round of large grants, which enabled CRS to further develop the project methodology in 2011 and 2012.



*GRRAM team discusses with key stakeholders about project concept and objective, asking their recommendations about which specific DRR urban areas to select in their area. This photo was taken in Ezbeit Abid Rabu in the north of Gaza Strip*

**Development** creating practical, actionable plans and guidelines

Through the GRRAM project, CRS planned to pilot DRR activities in five sites across Gaza with 200 households (approximately 1,500 people) who were exposed to a wide range of hazards.<sup>2</sup> (natural or conflict-related) at different levels (from the household up), and hazard mapping and community-based risk reduction planning.

From the outset, CRS tried to ensure that it was able to reflect on practice and capture learning throughout the pilot period. Although it had planned to produce a 'how-to' guide on DRR programming in urban, conflict-prone areas that involved working with non-state actors, CRS also understood that finding other ways to document and share the evolving GRRAM concept would be vital to realising the project's added value. Given the limited experience

of participatory methods among the newly recruited national staff, it was also important to have structured guidance, however flexible. To this end, an implementation guide was produced for those tasked with delivering the project, alongside the 'learning agenda', which included the project framework, progress indicators and monitoring data.

CRS planned to identify a local partner to implement the project, and had worked with several local organisations at the proposal stage and on project design. It also held a three-day workshop that convened many of the national and international humanitarian actors that had previously been involved in informal discussions about the challenge of adopting a DRR approach in the Gaza context.

<sup>2</sup> The selected sites were Al Bureij Refugee Camp, Jabalya Refugee Camp, Ezbat Beit Hanunon and Shujaiyeh, Salam Neighbourhood.

This process of identifying an implementing partner and formalising other partnerships ultimately proved to be one of the most important (and time-consuming) issues. It was originally envisaged that the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) would be an informal observer of the process. However, after learning of PRCS's experience of DRR work (including conducting Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments (VCAs) and implementing specific DRR projects), CRS invited PRCS to be the implementing partner for the GRRAM project. Entering into such a partnership was to prove both an opportunity and a challenge – an opportunity, because PRCS brought considerable knowledge and technical experience (particularly on conducting VCAs) to the project, as well as credibility and access to target communities; but also a challenge, as bureaucratic delays and issues around profile and relative expertise threatened to undermine negotiations for the partnership before it had officially begun. Finally, reflecting the strong commitment to this innovative approach from both organisations the two organisations, signed a partnership agreement for the GRRAM project in late January 2012.

Inevitably, the process of adapting each partner's existing practice and methods specifically for the GRRAM project created a number of challenges and tensions. Some of these, such as maintaining an engaged group of participants and avoiding a culture of dependency, are common to any participatory process in a humanitarian setting. But others are specific to innovation projects, which, by their nature, challenge accepted ways of working and potentially involve more risk for beneficiaries and field staff alike.

There are also specific challenges linked to the process of innovation – most notably, issues around engaging vulnerable communities in innovation processes, and how best to adapt existing methods for use in new ways. In the GRRAM project, these challenges – particularly the extent to which VCA approaches and tools could be adapted for use with extremely vulnerable groups, and used to span a range of hazards (natural or conflict-related) – proved the most difficult to overcome.

Based on their experience of conducting VCAs, PRCS was sceptical about using this tool with groups of people with low education levels, and they were hesitant about shortening the process to fit the timeframe required by the project. Conversely, CRS felt that targeting vulnerable groups who are normally excluded from risk analysis processes was fundamental to the GRRAM approach.<sup>3</sup> Though not fully resolved, these tensions were managed by divesting control of the programme as much as possible to field staff, who were able to negotiate and adapt on an ongoing basis and avoid a situation developing that would have potentially jeopardised the partnership.

The participatory process that was developed through GRRAM consisted of a range of activities, including consensus-building meetings with a range of local stakeholders in order to identify target groups. These were followed by training and capacity-building for project staff and participants on VCA, project management, and moving from identifying vulnerabilities to devising community-based mitigation strategies.

Households participating in the GRRAM project identified a range of vulnerabilities reflecting the complex nature of the environment in which they live. They cited threats ranging from unemployment (rated highest) to military incursion, to household accidents (including asphyxiation and fire) often caused by having to use generators during frequent power outages.

With GRRAM project plans intentionally focusing on the development stage, the limited resources earmarked for implementation of mitigation projects (around 10% of the total grant) inevitably fell short of the communities' needs, leading to unmet expectations among some participants. Nonetheless, many of the participants consulted in connection with this case study reported learning new skills during the course of the training. Given the anxiety and despondency stemming from rising poverty levels, physical insecurity, and limited agency, these benefits should be seen as an important element of GRRAM.

CRS allocated \$2,000 to each of the five target

*Implementation to produce real examples of change*

communities for the implementation of small-scale projects to meet needs identified during the development phase. Because of these very limited resources, it was not possible to address problems such as widespread unemployment or to progress some of the initial ideas participants had, such as building an education and community centre. Together with the short implementation period (initially planned for one year), this restricted the scale and scope of the target groups' proposed DRR activities and forced participants to establish alternative, less costly plans to address the main hazards they had identified. They subsequently decided to implement activities based on small-scale solid waste management, the provision of communal water tanks, and supplying first aid kits and training.

Both CRS and PRCS staff noted the emphasis of target groups and other stakeholders on material benefits that might be brought by the project, despite a concerted effort by field staff early on to communicate that the project was concerned with innovations in the approach, rather than service provision or material inputs. Some, particularly in PRCS, also argued that community expectations of material benefits had influenced how the target groups prioritised the hazards they face. This perhaps highlights another point – that the wide range of vulnerabilities identified by GRRAM participants inevitably exceeds the response capacity of any individual organisation. This point underlines the need to embed DRR efforts such as GRRAM within the broader relief strategies, and to raise the issue through indirect links with de facto powers – for instance, through advocacy training.



*RS three-day workshop exploring disaster risk reduction theory, how it is applicable to Gaza, and how it serves as the foundation for GRRAM.*

*Diffusion of successful innovations - taking them to scale and leading to wider adoption outside the original setting.*

The diffusion of a successful or promising innovation is dependent on a range of factors, including its relative advantage, compatibility with existing ways of doing things, its level of complexity, whether it can be trialled, and the extent to which its success can be measured and observed by others<sup>4</sup>. However, for successful innovations to have an impact outside their original setting, it is essential that there are structured (and appropriately resourced) efforts to share emerging results.

Throughout the project period, CRS used the HIF website and a project blog to share information about how the GRRAM project was developing. These online resources provided valuable insights into areas such as information verification and the challenges of working with diverse urban populations<sup>5</sup>. But, they have only limited reach beyond those who were already aware of the initiative, and have provided short updates on specific activities rather than covering broader issues.

Initially, CRS had planned to produce a ‘how-to’ guide that would attempt to capture the experience of the project process, and present the GRRAM methodology in such a way that it could easily be replicated by other agencies and in other settings. But as the project completion date approached, CRS reappraised its readiness to produce such a guide. Feedback from participants about the project’s impact during the spike in hostilities at the end of 2012 – that GRRAM had provided helpful knowledge on how to deal with psychological

distress (particularly among children) but had not led to wider changes in behaviour – contributed to an acknowledgement within the organisation that the approach needed further development with selected communities before it was ready to put forward for replication and expansion. Dissemination activities upon completion would therefore focus on capturing and sharing lessons learned during the project through the final evaluation process, rather than providing practical guidance on how to implement the innovation.

In addition to exploring the process behind each example of innovation, these HIF case studies aim to draw on the experiences described to test particular hypotheses about what helps or inhibits successful innovation. The results will be used to generate findings that could be generalised to improve both the theoretical understanding of innovation in humanitarian practice and the practical support available to those attempting to make these innovations. This final section therefore focuses on what the GRRAM project experience reveals about humanitarian innovation more widely.

**Partnerships and collaborations**

This case study supports the broad proposition that partnership and collaborative working play an important role in successful innovation processes. But we can perhaps go further and note two features of the relationships within the project.

The first relates to the evolution of collaboration within GRRAM. Initially, a wide variety of actors (formal and informal) were involved in discussions and interactions, sharing a range of viewpoints and experiences. The series of informal exchanges between national and international

<sup>4</sup> Rogers E (1963) *Diffusion of Innovation*. New York: Free Press

<sup>5</sup> The GRRAM project blog is available at: [www.humanitarianinnovation.org/blog/20](http://www.humanitarianinnovation.org/blog/20)

actors interested in finding new approaches to risk reduction and new ways of working in the constrained political environment of Gaza proved crucial to creating the momentum needed to move the GRRAM approach forward. Yet the key formal relationship with PRCS was only identified later in the process. This suggests that these early interactions are important in their own right, not just as a route to identifying the more formal partnerships and collaborations that may be needed for delivering the innovation, but also for generating the creative energy and exchange of ideas needed to fuel innovation in the early stages. It also provides an interesting example of the non-linear nature of innovation, as it shows that the diffusion and spread of innovative ideas is a dynamic and ongoing process that can take place even before a tangible innovation has formed.

The second relates to the management of the partnership between CRS and PRCS. The partnership developed relatively late on in the innovation development process – after the project had succeeded in gaining HIF funding – and proved challenging to formalise, which delayed the progress of the project and created an increased element of risk. The strategy adopted for managing the relationship was to divest responsibility for resolving disagreements to field teams, with as little involvement of senior management as feasible. This meant that those who were involved in the innovation project on a day-to-day basis could adopt a pragmatic approach and adapt as necessary, rather than always referring back to senior managers. This appears to have been a successful strategy, preventing potential disagreements escalating to a point where they might have threatened the core relationship and, in turn, project delivery. But this same example also calls into question the longer-term sustainability of such an approach, as the continuation of the relationship beyond the initial project period looks doubtful.

### The role of established knowledge and practice

This element of the GRRAM project also underpins the importance of drawing on existing knowledge and, in particular, existing practice, codes and standards – in this case in relation

to Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments. Despite the unique context in Gaza, there was a concerted attempt to draw on existing practice, including standardised methods and tools. A process of adaptation then ensured that these were viable and relevant for the context. However, this example also suggests that deconstructing and adapting formalised knowledge may not always be straightforward or uncontentious; adaptation of the VCA tools and methods used in GRRAM proved to be a source of considerable tension in the developing relationship between CRS and PRCS.

### Managing risk

Risk is inherent to the process of innovation, with increased uncertainty over the outcomes (intended or unintended) of an intervention in addition to any specific contextual, institutional or programmatic risks relating to the activities involved. HIF requires that all funding applications outline both the anticipated risks and strategies for their mitigation. In its application for the GRRAM project, CRS had outlined risks in two broad but overlapping categories: those relating to the communities that would be participating, and those relating to the volatile context of the Gaza Strip.

To mitigate risks in the former category – an issue that is highly relevant for other organisations looking to engage affected populations in humanitarian innovation – CRS took extensive steps to ensure that all those involved were aware of the emergent nature of the project and the relatively small amount of resources allocated to the implementation stage and the delivery of material benefits. However, despite these efforts, some participants expressed their disappointment that more material support had not emerged, regardless of the other, non-material benefits they perceived the project to have brought.<sup>6</sup> This may partly reflect the pervasive culture of aid dependency across the territory, but it also underlines the importance of clear, transparent and ongoing communication with those involved in innovation projects. For projects that focus on the development phase, the material benefits for participants at the later implementation stage may be relatively small

(or indeed fail to emerge at all). It is therefore imperative that agencies clearly communicate this risk if they are to engage with populations in ways that are informed and ethical, and avoid raising expectations that, if unmet, may lead to increasing tensions or frustration.

### Modes and timing of diffusion

Ensuring that successful innovations are taken to scale and diffused is an essential part of any successful innovation process, and is fundamental to realising a return on the investment in innovation. It is also the stage that is perhaps most often overlooked. Where market forces are absent, the organisation(s) involved in developing the innovation may need to make concerted, strategic efforts to ensure that their experience is shared and the ideas diffused. Although the GRRAM project mainly focused on the development stage, and subsequently rolled back its initial ambitions to produce guidance on how to plan and implement a methodology for DRR in urban conflict settings, CRS's experience may nonetheless offer two important insights into the nature of diffusion.

First, the range of discussions and relationships that have continued throughout the project demonstrate the non-linear nature of the innovation process, with diffusion (the spread of ideas and experience) being a continual process that began very early on, in the 'recognition' stage. Despite being difficult to measure, this has obvious implications for the understanding of diffusion more broadly. Not least, it underscores the need for organisations involved in innovation to think about diffusion systematically from the outset, developing a structured dissemination strategy that includes informal as well as formal ways of promoting the spread and exchange of ideas.

Second, the GRRAM project experience highlights the clear distinction between sharing general reflections and lessons, and the diffusion of good practices and structured implementation guidance; the latter is dependent on the innovation having sufficiently demonstrated its performance in one or more settings. Even then, evidence from other innovations that have diffused through the humanitarian system in recent years (for example, cash transfers or

community therapeutic care to treat malnutrition) underscores the need for widespread, systematic research and evaluation before an innovation becomes more widely accepted and adopted.

### Demonstrating impact

Organisations involved in innovation must find ways to credibly demonstrate how those innovations advance practice or add value to the humanitarian response. In the long term, this is essential if successful innovations are to be consolidated and diffused, even as they continue to be adapted and refined. This is a particularly relevant issue for the GRRAM project, and a concerted effort to generate and capture learning from the project will doubtless prove valuable for CRS and others. It is, however, notable that at project completion CRS is looking to move forward by focusing its innovation work on a smaller number of communities funded by a partner from the Caritas Internationalis network, rather than working on diffusion or expansion of activities. This next stage of the project may, in time, produce more evidence on the extent to which the implementation of the GRRAM project approach leads to a measurable reduction in risk and improved outcomes. Generating such evidence must be a central concern for CRS, as well as finding ways to adapt the approach to other settings and organisations. What happens in this next stage will be of great interest to other organisations attempting to develop their own humanitarian innovations.