

Relief International's Innovative Local Medical Supplier Development Project: An Update

Jason Bower, Relief International (RI)

Abstract

Humanitarian organisations require reliable access to quality-assured pharmaceuticals and medical supplies, yet suppliers in countries with less mature regulatory systems often cannot meet donor and NGO standards. Dependence on international suppliers creates long lead times and substantial freight and customs challenges, delaying life-saving programmes. Local suppliers may also lack knowledge of humanitarian quality requirements, market size and demand, reducing incentives to invest in stronger quality systems.

Relief International's Local Medical Supplier Development Project has sought to address these barriers with an ambitious project to support suppliers across four conflict-affected countries. The first phase has been running from 2024 to 2026 in Afghanistan and Yemen in collaboration with technical partner Quamed; whilst the second phase from 2026 to 2027 has commenced Chad and Syria.

Five suppliers in each country are selected in each country, baseline audits are conducted, tailored 18 month technical assistance plans are developed to address gaps, and then final audits are conducted to assess compliance with the relevant standards. In Afghanistan, Yemen and Chad, the focus has been on importer/distributor companies and their compliance with WHO Good Storage and Distribution Practices (GSDP) and partially to the WHO Model Quality Assurance System for Procurement Agencies (MQAS). In Syria, where there is a strong pharmaceutical manufacturing sector and significant import restrictions, RI plans to support local manufacturers meet WHO Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP).

The work in each country has highlighted the parallel need for market shaping efforts to bring suppliers and the humanitarian organisations closer, and to support the regulatory systems that will continue to regulate the markets. Consequently, RI has introduced additional activities and stimulated local working groups, whilst engaging at the global level on complementary initiatives that could substantially increase the impact.

The project also incorporates an operational research study conducted by ITM, to generate understanding of the barriers and enabling conditions to strengthened quality systems for medical suppliers in the four countries, and the extent to which the project methodology responds to these.

Through this project, RI seeks to demonstrate a practical pathway to faster, lower-cost and more sustainable local procurement of quality-assured medical products in humanitarian settings, while strengthening local markets, regulatory alignment and supply-chain resilience. RI will provide an update on the project and observations from the activities to date.