

Norad’s management response to the end review of “Partnering for transformational change: Strengthening Liberia’s surgical health system” 2021-2023, Mercy Ships

Norad welcomes the final report from the end review. The conclusions and recommendations in the report rest on the evidence gathered in the review process and represent the views of the independent Hera review team. Norad acknowledges the findings and conclusions in the report. It provides a balanced view of achievements but also shortcomings in the project and the management of it, by both MS and Norad. We take note of several lessons learned, but will particularly mention two:

- An acknowledgement of the enormous efforts required for a large and well-established organization such as MS to change from a modus operandi which had worked to their satisfaction for decades, towards sustainable health system strengthening through national institutions in the countries where they work. Although anchored in the new strategy since 2021, such changes take time, profound competency in institutional capacity building and a concerted effort from all levels of the organization.
- A sub-optimal grant management process lingers throughout the project lifetime. Starting with a political decision to support MS, both parties tried to “fit a square into a circle” - adapting the project to align with the health system strengthening approach adhered to by Norad. Then came changes in grant managers during a relatively short period due to the reorganization in Norad in 2021 and internal mobility, all while we had to give the highest priority to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Norad has assessed the recommendations directed at us and aims to follow-up:

End-Term Recommendation	Norad’s Follow-up
Both Mercy Ships and Norad to carefully reflect on the desirability of collaboration	Reflections ongoing and discussed with Mercy Ships
Norad to focus reflections on whether it wants to continue supporting projects of this nature (relatively short-term, implemented by an organisation with little technical knowledge in Norad’s focus areas, and limited experience in all areas of grant management of bilateral funding)	Learning will be taken into account in the assessment of new applications. Norad’s new portfolio approach entails more profound assessments of the potential contribution of different partners to overall outcomes within portfolios.
Norad to revise its requirements for eligibility of funding, including the definition of what it considers health system strengthening.	Norad’s new portfolio on Health System Strengthening (HSS) will provide clearer definitions which will set criteria for project selection.
Norad to analyse the risks associated with the application of changes and exceptions in grant management at its own level	Standard grant management training and guidelines across Norad in place. Close follow-up by leader when change in grant manager or exceptions occur.
Norad to schedule a joint country visit with both representatives from Norad and the grantee in an early phase of the project	Due to the high number of agreements managed by Norad, this is not always possible for capacity reasons. However, revised grant management guidance requires more regular partner organization assessments.