Third Party Monitoring and Remote Management Modality Study

FINAL REPORT

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& DEVELOPMENT

Acronyms

CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability
CSO	Civil society organization
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DM	Direct management
FGD	Focus group discussion
IDP	Internally displaced person
I/NGO	International/Non-government organization
IP	Implementing partner
JPF	Japan Platform
KII	Key Informant Interview
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
RM	Remote management
ToR	Terms of reference
TPM	Third-party monitoring
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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Executive Summary

Background

Japan Platform (JPF) engaged Trust Consultancy to conduct a research study and assessment of its third-party monitoring (TPM) and remote management (RM) modalities as well as those approaches used by other actors in the humanitarian and development sector. The study's core objective was to identify and examine common challenges and best practices based on the experiences of JPF and its member NGOs with TPM and RM, as well as the experiences of other actors from across this sector. The study focused primarily on the perspectives of JPF member NGOs, TPM providers and other stakeholders in the target countries of Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and South Sudan. However, actors operating in other contexts were included as well.

Through a desk review of available published literature, a document review of reports from JPF's previous TPM exercises, discussions with member NGO staff and other stakeholders, and an online survey, the research team gathered insights into key challenges and recommendations for best practises related to third-party monitoring and remote management. The final report has been developed in two versions – one with a focus on JPF specific findings and recommendations, and one directed towards a public audience with a focus on findings from the wider humanitarian/development sector and recommendations aimed at improving the use of TPM and RM approaches by all involved stakeholders.

Key TPM Findings

Scope of Work (SoW)

1. Increased communication and coordination between contracting entities, such as donors, and implementing organizations related to the scheduling of the TPM promoted more effective alignment with project cycles, increasing the effectiveness of the exercise. The study found that better alignment of the TPM with the project cycle, based on the purpose of exercise, allowed for greater opportunities for implementers and their partners to provide valuable input to inform the scope or approach of the TPM. In one example of a missed opportunity for this type of coordination and alignment, a NGO staff member described a recent TPM beginning after the selected project closed and due to the lapse in time, the IDP beneficiaries were especially difficult to locate as they had moved on to other locations.

2. The timing of the TPM should not only consider project cycles, but also contextual challenges, such as estimated times to receive necessary permits or the effect of seasonal changes to access. The challenge of clear communication and coordination may be addressed in part by a stronger shared understanding of M&E and TPM among involved parties. Stronger communication around the proposed timing of the TPM exercise considering these factors is encouraged in order for the TPM process to be actively complimentary to the NGOs' internal M&E processes.

Inception Phase and Preparation for Data Collection

3. Based on the diversity in preferences and considerations, rather than promoting a uniform level of involvement in the development of indicators and data collection tools, contracting entities and NGOs should prioritize strong communication during this process in order to align expectations. Some NGOs enjoyed being able to shape the evaluation framework, while others appreciated the TPM exercise as providing an independent outsider-perspective of the project under monitor. The latter were therefore

satisfied with the development of indicators and tools taking place between the donor (which was the contracting entity in these cases) without influence of the implementing partner itself.

4. The process of sending and receiving necessary project documents between involved parties was often the root of avoidable delays during the TPM exercises reviewed. TPM providers with gaps in their information face more difficulties adequately preparing for fieldwork and during data collection as well.

5. Supported by continuous communications, aligned expectations are crucial to the inception period as well as subsequent phases of the TPM. Regardless of previous experiences with TPM, aligning expectations as early as possible is a key factor informing how prepared NGOs under monitor are to participate and cooperate appropriately.

6. A clear distinction among NGOs' experiences with TPM was the emergence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most salient challenges identified during the inception phase was the impact (or predicted impact) of COVID-19. However, some interruptions to project operations due to COVID-19-related restrictions provided an opportunity for NGO staff to allocate more time than expected to support the TPM. Without this lull, some NGOs admitted that they may have otherwise been under a lot of pressure due to their limited number of staff.

Data Collection

7. As data collection commences, implementing actors (NGOs and/or their IPs) have an important role to play in promoting community acceptance. NGOs that rely on IPs, and therefore have a limited presence in the field themselves, often described their role during this phase as facilitating cooperation and coordination between the TPM provider and IPs. NGOs who operated remotely were generally not expected to provide significant support to the TPM field team during data collection and contracted TPM providers highlighted their deep contextual knowledge of areas under monitor and are confident on the ground. Nevertheless, TPM providers described support from IPs as helpful as they often had even greater knowledge of very specific and complex project site dynamics in addition to providing detailed project information ad hoc as needed. Even though TPM providers hire local staff as best practice, support from IPs was appreciated.

8. During data collection, the participation and responsiveness of NGOs and partners varied greatly, as well as their involvement. The distinction between responsiveness and participation (e.g. involvement) was relevant in understanding some of the reported challenges during data collection. Responsiveness was important to all involved stakeholders throughout the TPM, while direct participation was less uniformly expected. Responsiveness indicated "passive" practices such as providing consistent and timely responses to inquiries and requests for documents. Participation, or "active" support happened when NGOs or partners offered information above the essential requirements, such as independently offering ad hoc solutions to unforeseen risks and changes in the field. Although the optimal degree of participation may vary across projects under TPM, responsiveness is always crucial and should be prioritized to the extent possible at all stages of the TPM.

9. As expected, interviewed TPM providers assumed the bulk of responsibility for risk assessments and having in place sufficient safety procedures. Familiar with the potentially insecure environment, each TPM

provider explained that they had their own procedures and protocols specific to the context and the nature of foreseen threats or difficulties. Security and risk mitigation were important issues for the TPM providers included in this study as well as NGOs. Yet, it did not appear to pose the main challenges, perhaps because in some target countries these issues represent an integral factor in TPM operations. Additionally, while TPM providers' strong contextual understanding of project areas is often fundamental, their willingness to listen and incorporate considerations from NGOs and IPs in their assessment of risks and challenges as good practice would also help facilitate safe and efficient TPM.

Analysis and Reporting

10. Several NGO staff emphasized the added value of the qualitative data gathered and analysed through the TPM. This appreciate was often expressed by NGOs managing projects remotely and through IPs. Qualitative data (e.g. beneficiary, project staff, partner and stakeholder interviews) was described as complementing and informing the results of their internal monitoring, which more frequently relied on quantitative data. Having an impartial view of the ground, informed especially by insights related to beneficiary perspectives, was also frequently cited as an important value added. This finding is interesting considering survey responses that suggested respondents found TPM more appropriate for collecting and analysing quantitative data. For some respondents and KII participants, TPM may be best suited or most feasible when collecting and analysing quantitative data for verification; nevertheless, TPM can also offer different perspectives through qualitative data, especially those related to beneficiary and IP experiences.

Lessons Learned: TPM

All interviewed NGOs reported benefiting in some way from the TPM exercises with which they had experienced. However, it was also widely agreed that integrating the findings into current and future programming could be improved. The final stages of feedback during the TPM process played an essential role in this regard. Thorough debriefing meetings prior to the submission of the final report were greatly appreciated by all parties, however such meetings were not held uniformly across the projects. Linking to some of the issues encountered through the analysis and reporting stage of the project, debriefings were not always facilitated, and even final reports were not always been received by NGOs. Without debriefings or final reports, it appeared difficult for NGOs to integrate the learnings from the TPM exercise, pointing to the larger issue of having an effective system or organizational practices in place to incorporate learnings from the TPM.

TPM providers and NGOs expressed that alignment between parties on the purpose of the exercise and the overall 'meaning' of TPM (as addressed in the sections for Scope of Work and Inception Phase) is pivotal to avoiding missed opportunities at this final stage of the monitor. Lack of clarity about the exercise, and the desired end result of it, complicates attempts to establish feedback loops with partners throughout the process as well as at the conclusion of TPM. One respondent from a TPM consultancy addressed this tension directly: "*Sometimes our update meetings would turn into a capacity building exercise.*" Without fully understanding the purpose of the TPM, NGOs under monitor may not engage as effectively in constructive feedback loops at the various stages of the exercise, as they may not have a clear idea of what to expect from the process or their role in achieving the TPM's overarching goals.

The process of submitting, receiving and incorporating recommendations and feedback is perhaps one of the stages in which there is the most potential for improvement. NGO staff respondents appreciated TPM, particularly for the potential benefits to their beneficiaries. However, they also expressed concerns that the benefits of the exercises were not being maximized: "*Personally, I'm with the idea that this third-party monitoring, it could really help us. And I think there's a way it could help us more. So, whatever the data or results, or output they can present, I wish we could discuss more how we can utilize this output to improve our implementation.*"

A key finding of the research study was the shared desire for greater integration of TPM results. Specifically, respondents pointed to debriefing meetings after the first draft of the final report but before the submission of the final report. Through such meetings, involved parties may allocate time and space to discuss strategies to integrate the outcomes into current and future programming. Relevant parties should prioritize follow-ups as appropriate and establish applicable procedures to maximize integration of results. Many respondents suggested establishing open forums actors supporting and implementing projects in similar contexts to discuss common challenges and share mitigation strategies to draw upon each other's key lessons learned.

Increasing the space for feedback and experience sharing emerged from this study as a priority that is in the best interest of all parties. When asked to select 5 factors among 27 options for the factors that most greatly influence the success of a TPM exercise, the factor survey respondents cited second most frequently was "the openness and consistency of channels of communication between commissioning organization and TPM provider." Contracting entities, NGOs, and TPM providers should maintain 'openness' and 'consistency' in their communications, not only during the inception period, but also once key findings have been identified.

Recommendations: TPM

1. Alignment with project implementation cycles and ensuring adequate time for NGOs to prepare for upcoming TPM will address some of the key issues that were reported recurrently. Increased coordination and communication between contracting entities and NGOs about the scheduling and scope of the TPM may therefore increase the effectiveness of TPM exercises.

2. Consider how further developing a shared understanding of the overall purpose and use of M&E and TPM among involved parties may provide increased opportunities for TPM to better complement NGOs the internal monitoring of NGOs.

3. Related to the diverse preferences and considerations informing NGOs' involvement in the development of indicators and data collection tools, strong communication should be prioritized particularly during the inception phase to align expectations rather than promote a particular level of involvement.

4. Irrespective of the amount of experience an NGO may have with TPM, aligning expectations as early and thoroughly as possible appears critical to success.

5. TPM stakeholders should learn from experiences coping with COVID-19 related challenges so far (and leveraging unique opportunities) to further develop contingency plans in the case of new developments regarding the pandemic or other unforeseen challenges.

6. To the extent possible, NGOs under monitor and their IPs should work to promote community acceptance of the TPM provider and their activities by establishing channels for communication and facilitating cooperation between the TPM and IPs. A number of TPM providers reported that the support of NGOs and IPs in promoting community acceptance facilitated efficient data collection.

7. The degree of NGO participation that is ideal for a given TPM will vary, but all relevant parties' responsiveness was instrumental in cases of the TPM's success and should be maintained throughout all stages of the TPM according to parties' roles and responsibilities.

8. Although TPM providers tend to assume the bulk of the risk as it relates to potential threats and insecurities in the field, all parties involved in a TPM exercise NGOs should engage in good practices of promoting mutual, open channels for communicating potential challenges, risks and mitigation strategies.

9. Consider how contracting entities and NGOs can further leverage TPM and the learnings to enhance beneficiary accountability while also producing findings and recommendations relevant to the beneficiaries themselves. Effectively demonstrating the learnings and value add of monitoring exercises to policy makers and donors could have the positive largescale effect of promoting a more enabling environment to support these projects.

Key Findings: Remote Management

1. Key informant feedback indicated that soft skills, experience within the aid sector as well as in the local context were some of the key factors that informed the success of remote management approaches. Study participants with strong experience in applying RM approaches suggested that certain personal traits should receive higher valuation than in current hiring practice for roles that rely on RM approaches. Respondents considered previous experience with humanitarian or development interventions important. Many respondents also identified technical skills and formal education as assets. However, the importance of that formal education or previous technical training and associated hard skills varied depending on a range of circumstances throughout contexts. Alternatively, regardless of projects or contexts, respondents emphasized the crucial role of soft skills in determining the success of remote approaches.

2. Capacity building can extend beyond trainings and webinars to include fostering a culture of intentional mentorship and peer-learning through identifying complementary skillsets along with opportunities for cooperation and support. Alongside capacity building to promote effective remote implementation and monitoring, organizations that rely on remote approaches could benefit from investing in alternative types of capacity building that strengthen interpersonal relationships at a distance, align understandings and promote inclusion. Strategies leveraging

remote approaches to facilitate capacity building that promotes greater inclusion of staff across functions, internal learning initiatives and decision-making as appropriate should be explored.

3. The study revealed that inclusive remote approaches strengthened the flexibility and, ultimately, the sustainability of those approaches to RM. Having staff at all levels that feel included and to some extent responsible for the project goal develops a higher degree of resilience when faced with unexpected challenges (e.g. COVID-19). Again, the effectiveness of communication was critical to success. Frequently reported best practices included leveraging multiple platforms for communication and establishing both formal and informal channels of communication as appropriate. Such efforts facilitated stronger integration of the different types of knowledge held across functions and more seamless feedback loops.

4. When asked about possible alternatives to their current remote approaches, study participants often noted that any transition towards more direct approaches, or other remote approaches, may largely depend on contextual factors as well as wider trends in the aid sector. Few respondents exclusively preferred direct management. Instead respondents tended to consider the relative advantages and disadvantages of remote management. Importantly though, remote approaches should be adapted to the contexts they are applied to. There was notable range in the degree to which respondents believed their current approaches were sustainable or not, and such considerations were often linked to perceptions of the approaches' inclusivity and organizational delegation and sharing of decision-making across functions. Some respondents observed that current remote approaches were not necessarily accompanied by opportunities for professional development and mobility of national staff within the organization, which was often noted as informing the overall sustainability of projects and their impact. Feedback gathered through this study suggested that this may relate to more fundamental and structural issues within the aid sector.

5. Finally, the study found that risk management was a core concern across many approaches to RM. There was generally a strong awareness of unevenly distributed risk during remote approaches to implementation and monitoring. COVID-19 raised additional safety concerns to be taken into account; however, given the contexts in which many of the RM actors in this study operated and relevant protocols and policies already in place to manage and mitigate risk, the pandemic did not appear to have an overwhelming impact on the approaches respondents used. Appropriate delegation and sharing of decision-making contributed to effective and responsible risk management. Additionally, fostering professional environments (e.g. culture) and relationships that facilitated open and honest communication was integral to ensuring that critical knowledge was shared among decision-makers across functions.

Lessons Learned: Remote Management

For some study participants, RM is a temporary approach for specific situations when conditions do not allow key staff to access project sites either for implementation or monitoring. Most study respondents did not consider RM a long-term sustainable approach. For some of them, remote management represented the only opportunity for project continuity. However, regardless the duration of its use, the effectiveness of RM depended on key factors such as effective communication, trust, appropriate delegation and partnership in decision-making and consistent capacity building. Since managers in remote locations cannot directly oversee project progress in the field, they must rely on staff (or partner staff) at engage in in transparent conversation and reporting throughout. Trust and transparency is also essential not only in terms of communication, but also in terms of delegation of authority to country office and field staff. Micromanagement is not a recommended RM strategy and managing staff should enable staff to make timely and relevant decisions such as those related to daily operations. To ensure good implementation, organizations have to invest in good communication, and different types of capacity building across organizational levels and functions.

Bearing in mind the vital role of in-country, national staff, a number of informants shared their observations about the relative lack of mobility within the sector for national staff. In this study, participants who described their organization as deliberately recruiting national staff or using partnership approaches and regular investment in assessing and building capacity tended to report success capacity assessment and development appeared more likely to perceive their modalities for remote implementation as sustainable or monitoring data as credible and high quality. Some respondents shared the opinion that having national staff in management and other decision-making positions was oftentimes preferable to having international staff in such positions, as international staff tended to experience higher rates of turnover (e.g. due to relocating, etc.).

During the inception of this project, it was initially anticipated that the operational challenges related to access and risk specifically associated with the global pandemic would be a more salient theme in this component of the research study. However, observations about COVID-19 and its implications for remote approaches frequently showcased the opportunities pandemic-related restrictions and trends offered, rather than the limitations it posed. Many practitioners who already used RM prior to the pandemic described the current situation as a unique window of opportunity to reassess existing practices and push forward the agenda of localization and inclusion in humanitarian and development actions. With many international staff from INGOs having repatriated to their home countries or otherwise facing uncertain travel restrictions, there may be renewed interest in re-examining current practices in this newly opened space.

Recommendations: Remote Management

1. Feedback from many study participants emphasized that within this sector – particularly in remote approaches – attention to 'hard' technical skills should not neglect the importance of other key motivational and other soft skills, particularly as much work within the sector is highly interpersonal. Cultivating teams comprised of staff with complementary work approaches and skill sets can help facilitate more effective communication and partnership within and between groups of staff.

2. Investments in strengthening positive and productive 'cultures' wherein open communication is supported should complement technical trainings to develop staff and team capacity.

3. The establishment and use of multiple platforms for regular formal and informal communication within and across teams and partner staff could strengthen the inclusion and involvement at all functions of staff across types of remote approaches.

4. Remote approaches should be adapted to the contexts in which they are applied. Meaningful inclusion of staff across all functions, whether locally or remotely based, is often essential to the success of projects and their sustainability. The challenge here also relates to larger dynamics within the aid sector at a macro level, but awareness of this dynamic and how it plays out in specific remote approaches as executed by individual actors, could be beneficial to overall project success.

5. Study participants whose organizations currently rely on remote approaches demonstrated a high awareness of risk and risk management challenges and strategies. Issues related to risk due to insecurity in operational contexts continue to be key concerns in the sector, although other types of risks were also highlighted. Along with the extensive protocols and dedicated security staff, the feedback received through this study suggested that promoting inclusive practices and open communication are critical to continuing good practices of risk mitigation and management.

Introduction

Third-Party Monitoring

Third-Party Monitoring (TPM) refers to the collection and verification of monitoring data by contracted parties that are external to the aid project, their programmes' direct beneficiary chain or their management structure.[1] In recent years, the use of third-party monitoring in aid projects has expanded, particularly among a range of humanitarian organizations, to comply with donor requirements for external evaluations. A growing number of aid actors operating in insecure contexts rely on TPM as a means of monitoring the activities of partner organizations where access may be restricted.[2]

Although monitoring and evaluation, the two core components of TPM, are interrelated, they are distinct functions. As monitoring is primarily concerned with a project's processes and their immediate effects its operations are often continuous and regular.[3] On the other hand, evaluations are more often episodic and external as the approach to assessment is more comprehensive. However, the two activities are becoming increasingly similar and integrated.[4] Monitoring reports now frequently mention outcomes and impact when previously their primary concern was tracking and guiding inputs.[5] Similarly, evaluations are becoming more like monitoring activities as they provide regular and timely updates as opposed to focusing on midterm and final assessments.

As an array of services are included under TPM, it is important to note that the competencies and levels of experience across different TPM service providers also differ. In light of these differences, the range of roles and levels of engagement of TPM service providers also vary. In some cases, TPM providers serve more as project managers employed to manage staffing for monitoring activities.[6] In other cases their responsibilities extend to include more technical aspects of data collection and analysis.[7]

Third-Party Monitoring Modalities

As TPM is employed by different aid actors within the humanitarian and development sectors including donor countries/organizations, multilateral and bilateral support agencies and international NGOs, the activities and services entailed differ in focus, methods and objectives. For example, it is common practice for larger aid organizations to employ their own staff to both manage and implement monitoring activities. Meanwhile, specialized evaluation departments typically manage their evaluations while they are implemented by a third-party. A literature review revealed three prominent general modalities for TPM across the humanitarian sector:

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[1] Van Wicklin III, Warren A.; Asli Gurkan (2013), "How-to notes: participatory and third party monitoring in World Bank projects - what can non-state actors do?"
[2] Steets, J;, Sagmeister, E., Ruppert L. (October 2016). Eyes and Ears on the Ground: Monitoring Aid in Insecure Environments. SAVE.
[3] Warner, A. (2017) What is monitoring in humanitarian action? Describing practice and identifying challenges. ALNAP/ODI.
[4] Mountfield, B. (February 2015). Sphere for Monitoring and Evaluation. The Sphere Project.
[5] Guerrero, S. et al. (2013). On the right track? A brief review of monitoring and evaluation in the humanitarian sector.
[6] United Nations. (February 2015). Third Party and Collaborative Monitoring: Findings, Opportunities and Recommendations.
[7] United Nations. (February 2015). Third Party and Collaborative Monitoring: Findings, Opportunities and Recommendations.

- When commissioned by donors, TPM is used to verify and to monitor a project in relation to its basic planning indicators. Whilst most TPM services are contracted to carry out visits to project sites, some opt to only fund projects that are accessible by their own staff.[8]
- TPM also serves as a means of verification when commissioned by aid agencies or larger INGO's that work with implementing partners. TPM is hence less likely to be used by smaller INGO's that usually implement their own projects and do not deal with as many restrictions to access.
- Donors are also increasingly using TPM in the broader context of independent monitoring as more than just a means to collect and verify data. Here, third parties can be used to aggregate and analyze data as well as to assess, support and strengthen the monitoring capacities of their partners, as well as for baseline and endline surveys, needs assessments, and gap analysis among other functions.

Benefits of TPM

Prior research conducted on TPM has identified several key benefits of its use. Serving as a proxy, TPM is vital in ensuring access and collecting data in insecure areas where it is more difficult for an organization's own staff to be deployed. Additionally, as TPM service providers usually have better access they are also potentially able to provide more frequent monitoring and data collection.[9]

In cases where staff do not necessarily face restrictions to access, TPM offers a low-visibility option. This is because TPM reduces the need for staff visits which are higher in visibility due to their need to comply to stricter safety requirements. In this context, TPM may also present a more economical modality to monitoring as employing one's own staff generally entails added costs, such as organizing appropriate security arrangements, paying for adequate training and adjusting staff salary levels.

As previously mentioned, TPM is also a key tool used in verifying partner activities and ensuring compliance. An online survey conducted by the SAVE research programme found that 56% of international aid agencies operating in insecure environments claimed that they are 'not so satisfied' or 'not satisfied at all' with implementing partners' M&E processes.[10] In the context of this finding, TPM can offer services of greater quality especially in cases where an implementing partner's capacity may be limited or otherwise compromised.

There is some consensus in the available literature that TPM is generally most effective when it is used in conjunction with internal monitoring and verification systems. As such, aid agencies' investments in strengthening the internal M&E capacity of local partners also potentially bolsters the effectiveness of contracted TPM services.[11] A review of the available literature indicates a myriad of additional best practices that should be considered throughout all phases of TPM exercises, from planning and provider

[9] Sagmeister, E. et al. (December 2015). The use of third-party monitoring in insecure contexts: Lessons from Afghanistan and Somalia. SAVE.
[10] Sagmeister, E. et al. (October 2016). The use of third-party monitoring in insecure contexts: Lessons from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria. SAVE.

[11]Building Markets. (2018) What is the point if nothing changes? Current practices and future opportunities to improve remote monitoring and evaluation in Syria.

selection to design, implementation, and analysis. For example, regarding the selection of competent TPM providers, increased information-sharing between agencies has been suggested as a strategy to avoid selecting providers with poor performance track records or pose potential conflict of interests.[12] In order to uphold best practices on the ground, TPM providers (and those who commission their services) must be realistic and honest in their planning as well as prepared to deal with any potential restrictions to access.

Limitations of TPM

Despite the numerous advantages and benefits of TPM, there several potential costs and limitations associated with TPM. For example, many agencies have expressed dissatisfaction with the overall quality of TPM reports. Donors have voiced concerns over the reliability of collected data, poor translation and limitations in technical capabilities.[13] Research has also highlighted concerns about TPM providers' objectivity in their assessments and reporting. A study conducted by the Clingendael Institute that investigated TPM use in Syria and Somalia reported skepticism among some aid workers about the impartiality of TPM services.[14] According to some aid workers interviewed for the study, continuous visits to the same place or repeat contracts with the same donors threaten TPM's adherence to principles of neutrality.[12] This is exacerbated in part by the fact that it is not common practice for donors to conduct conflict of interest assessment. Additionally, TPM reports are often not shared with those implementing partners who are being monitored, lack of transparency throughout the provision of TPM services may also hinder efforts to build trust between donors and implementing and local NGOs, CSOs and other partnering entities.

Likewise, TPM staff do not always conduct their activities in a manner which builds trust with local communities as they may lack comprehensive training on key humanitarian principles (e.g. Do-no-harm).[15] This risks impairing relations between donors and beneficiaries particularly when TPM staff erroneously present their affiliations to donors, often resulting in confusion among beneficiaries about the role and purpose of TPM staff and their activities.[16]

TPM and COVID-19

This year approaches to TPM have had to adapt to new challenges posed by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions on travel and access have made traditional methods of collecting monitoring data more difficult across a range of contexts. To cope with these challenges and constraints, many providers have begun to rely or increased their reliance on remote management strategies. Altering monitoring design and data collection processes involves making several adjustments to staffing and resources and several

[12]Sagmeister, E. et al. (October 2016). The use of third-party monitoring in insecure contexts: Lessons from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria. SAVE.
[13] Sagmeister, E. et al. (October 2016). The use of third-party monitoring in insecure contexts: Lessons from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria. SAVE.
[14] CRU Report. (September 2018). Chapter 4: Effective monitoring in situations of conflict. Clingendael.
[15] Howe, K. et al. (February 2015). Breaking the hourglass: Partnerships in remote management settings- The cases of Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan. Feinstein International Center.
[16] Building Markets. (2018) What is the point if nothing changes? Current practices and future opportunities to improve remote monitoring and evaluation in Syria.

guidance notes have been developed in response.[17] Recommendations largely focus on adapting data tools and sampling methods so that social distancing is respected and increasing safety measures for field staff and beneficiaries.[18] However, despite the new challenges faced by the virus, the emphasis on effective and accountable adaptations to M&E processes brought about by COVID-19 may also present opportunities to develop and expand remote third-party systems.[19]

Remote Management

Generally, remote management (RM) describes any level of support (e.g. technical training) or control (e.g. project management) which is provided from a secondary location.[20] In some cases, RM may also include remote data management as a separate subset of considerations[21]. As ECHO noted in their 2013 guidelines on the subject, differentiating between remote and direct management on a case-by-case basis can be challenging. This distinction is complicated by the lack of stipulation that *all* management should be conducted remotely and the likelihood that decisions to manage remotely may change over time as security situations develop or access may be limited to certain geographical areas of implementation where access is more severely restricted, for example, in remote implementation areas.[22]

While RM can encompass a broad swathe of practices, a number of preliminary categories characterizing different modalities of RM can be distilled from the literature:[23]

- **Remote Control:** The decision making for programming is conducted from a remote location, with limited responsibility passed to in-country actors.
- **Remote Delegation:** Some decision making may be passed to in-country actors on a temporary or partial basis.
- **Remote Support:** A strategy is used in which local actors may have a larger amount of decision-making responsibility on a daily basis, with remote teams focusing on overarching strategy and/ or financial decisions.
- **Remote Partnership:** In these cases, a large amount of decision-making rests with local actors.

Although remote management is largely framed as an adaptive practice to meet operational needs, maintaining direct management as the default, available literature also suggests that RM may have additional benefits to facilitating access. For example, interviews with key stakeholders conducted by Tearfund showed that working with implementing partners through RM modalities could also assist in meeting requirements for building local capacity and ensuring local engagement, even in cases where

[17] UNOCHA. (2020) Global humanitarian response plan: COVID-19. April-December 2020
[18] Hayat, A. et al. (2020) Monitoring in the context of COVID-19. MSI.
[19] Humanitarian Advisory Group (May 2020). Remote humanitarian monitoring guidance note.
[20] IRC. (August 2016). Remote management guidelines (Syria).
[21] Creac'h, YK and Leidecker, H. (June 2018). Remote management: Meeting operational challenges. The Operations Partnership.
[22] European Commission. (2013). Instruction note for ECHO staff on remote management.
[23] Humanitarian Advisory Group (May 2020). Remote humanitarian monitoring guidance note.

local capacity is not yet sufficient for independent working.[24] As such, RM may represent a key element of broader strategies promoting local empowerment and accountability.

Benefits, Limitation and Factors for Success of Current Approaches to Remote Management

The ability to maintain programming despite operational challenges has significant potential benefits. Primarily, RM can facilitate the continued provision of much needed aid to vulnerable beneficiaries despite increasing volatility in insecure or fragile contexts. Secondly, continuity of programming has benefits for in-country staff, many of whom may also be members of affected populations and for whom the source of income and stability may be a cornerstone of their own resilience, mental wellbeing, and independence. Maintaining operations also has the potential to increase community buy-in and trust in the lead and partnering organizations, by demonstrating a continued commitment to the community's wellbeing by increasing local capacities.[25]

Despite the benefits of continued operations in insecure contexts where need remains high, transitioning to more remote strategies presents several challenges. The previously mentioned Tearfund study found that concerns were high among interviewed stakeholders that program quality could suffer. However, the study indicated that these concerns were largely speculative, and rested on stakeholders' intuitive understanding of the possible breakdowns in causal chains, for example, in a reduction in the amount and quality of supervision.

Additionally, UNHCR's good practice guidelines detailed other challenges to RM. The guidelines note that in Afghanistan, for example, a higher reliance on local actors such as *shuras* led to longer decision-making times. They also highlight that it was necessary to bolster RM practices with strong anti-corruption guidelines to maintain credibility.[26] Risk transfer represents another salient concern regarding the adoption of RM modalities, with local actors potentially assuming additional risk as international organizations adopt more hands-off approaches.[27] There may be other more practical reasons to eschew RM modalities as well, given that some major donors, such as ECHO, will not fund remotely managed programs except in exceptional circumstances.[28]

Decisions to adopt some level of RM are also informed by organizational factors, which may affect the success of RM implementation. Factors found to be critical for success have included larger proportions of national or diaspora staff, limiting programme scope, and concurrently building acceptance with local actors to increase direct management possibilities.[29] Other key factors include high level of transparency

[24] Norman, B. (2012). Monitoring and accountability practices for remotely managed projects implemented in volatile operating environments. Humanitarian Innovation Fund. Tearfund.
[25] Pavanello, S. et al. (July 2018). Fostering local partnerships in remote management and high-threat settings. Emerging lessons from child protection programming in Syria. Humanitarian Policy Group. ODI.; Collinson, S., Duffield, M. (March 2013) Paradoxes of presence. Risk management and aid culture in challenging environments. Humanitarian Policy Group. ODI.
[26] UNHCR. (2018-19). Remote management in high-risk operations Good practice and lessons learned.
[2727] Donini A, Maxwell D. (2014) From face-to-face to face-to-screen: remote management, effectiveness and accountability of humanitarian action in insecure environments. ICRC.
[28] European Commission. (2020). Working with DG ECHO as an NGO partner.
[29] Schreter, L. Harmer, A. (February 2013). Delivering aid in highly insecure environments. Humanitarian Outcomes.

between different partner organizations, and the judicious use of focal points to facilitate communication.[30]

The weight of these and other key considerations may vary across contexts, with certain country situations requiring different success factors or prioritizations. For example, in a 2018 report, Trust found that in the Syrian context, RM practices relied most heavily on trust building initiatives and good psychosocial support systems for national staff. Poor contextual sensitivity was cited as a potential barrier to success.[31] In Yemen on the other hand, sources suggest that minimizing corruption was a chief concern,[32] and in Iraq there were challenges in finding suitable partners.[33]

Remote Management and COVID-19

While many RM modalities have existed for some time, and are relatively commonplace in highly insecure contexts, the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic has further incentive many organizations to either begin adopting RM strategies, or to expand their use of such modalities. The Humanitarian Advisory Group in its guidance highlighted lessons learnt from the 2014 Ebola crisis. Their guidance recommended implementing co-designed programming which improve leverage of local knowledge and capacities. Additionally, the guidance suggests conducting comprehensive risk mapping as a collaborative task between remote and in-country personnel, to ensure that staff who cannot operate remotely are able to make informed choices for their safety.[34] In the context of COVID-19, decision-making must also consider additional protection concerns. Not only will needs for certain program types fluctuate (e.g. GBV case management), but maintaining confidentiality and other beneficiary protections when adopting new data collection software and technologies will also need to be prioritized.[35]

Alternative Strategies to Remote Management

Despite strong trends towards optimizing RM strategies, questions remain as to whether RM should be embraced as a long-term strategy, and whether alternative modalities might better serve (I)NGO's needs in access-restricted aid environments. An ECHO evaluation from 2012 suggests at least two alternative strategies which may be considered, either as full replacements, or in order to transition from RM more efficiently.

The first strategy is persuasion of local authorities. This may be used both as an alternative to, and in conjunction with, RM modalities. Managing and building this kind of acceptance presents a host of its own challenges however, and is sometimes accompanied with a perceived loss of neutrality, as reported in a

[30] Chaudhri, S. et al. (2019). Humanitarian programming and monitoring in inaccessible conflict settings. A literature review. Journal of International Humanitarian Action, 4, Article number: 9.
[31] Trust 2018
[32] Wittbold, B. et al. (April 2014). Humanitarian relief and building resilience in Yemen. Humanitarian Practice Magazine. ODI.
[33] Chaudhri, S. et al. (February 2017). Humanitarian programming and monitoring in inaccessible conflict settings. A literature review. Health Cluster. WHO
[34] Humanitarian Advisory Group. (May 2020). Remote humanitarian management and programming guidance note.
[35] Women's Refugee Commission. (April 2020). Guidance on establishing remote monitoring and management of GBV programming in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

2016 follow-up report by UNOCHA.[36] A 2011 Save the Children report investigating NGO acceptance in South Sudan found that indicators of acceptance were frequently not formally defined or recognized, and that the causal connection between increased acceptance and better security for operations was not necessarily guaranteed.

The second alternative strategy is risk mitigation through bunkerization, such as usage of gated or fortified office structures in which staff is physically and socially distanced from the communities and locations, they are in.[37] The mode of bunkerization is now acknowledged as having been impractical and counterproductive,[38] and has led to a decline in feelings of solidarity,[39] with more promising securitization policies involving the use of collective security arrangements. Finally, in some circumstances, where quality or principles become severely compromised by the security situation, disengagement may also be necessary.[40]

About Japan Platform Foundation and the Project

Japan Platform (JPF) is an international aid organization offering humanitarian and emergency assistance to refugees, IDPs and communities in regions and countries affected by natural and man-made disasters. Through a tripartite cooperation system where NGOs, the private sector, and the Government of Japan work in close cooperation, based on equal partnership, JPF conducts such aid while leveraging respective sectors' strengths and resources.

JPF functions as an intermediary support organization providing a range of types of assistance to NGO partners to deliver timely and comprehensive aid themselves. Since 2000, JPF has implemented over 1,500 projects and invested approximately 60 billion Japanese Yen to respond to humanitarian needs in 47 countries. In observe of its mandate, JPF has partnered with member NGOs to meet basic needs for the refugees and host communities in contexts where JPF and member NGOs are constrained by limited access due to security and other reasons. Due to these constraints, JPF relies on TPM service providers for not only verification, but for learning and improving future projects. While TPM is widely used by many aid agencies and has become a preferred method of programme and project monitoring for key stakeholders, JPF intends to evaluate the effectiveness of the TPM process and modality that it has adapted and implemented in the last two years.

Similarly, some member NGOs in insecure locations have adapted remote management modalities to implement projects in partnership with national partners and/or locally recruited personnel in order to avoid negative consequences of suspending humanitarian activities for maintaining project delivery. For

[36] Jackson, A. Zyck, S. (March 2017). Presence and proximity: To stay and deliver, five years on. NRC. UNOCHA.
[37] Donini A, Maxwell D. (2014) From face-to-face to face-to-screen: remote management, effectiveness and accountability of humanitarian action in insecure environments. ICRC.
[38] Fisher, J. (2017) Reproducing remoteness? States, internationals and the co-constitution of aid 'bunkerization' in the East African periphery. Volume 11, 2017 - Issue 1
[39] Fisher, J. (2017) Reproducing remoteness? States, internationals and the co-constitution of aid 'bunkerization' in the East African periphery. Volume 11, 2017 - Issue 1
[40] Streets, (June 2012). Evaluation and review of humanitarian access strategies in DG ECHO funded interventions. European Commission.

the overall success of projects and programs, member NGO's capacity for monitoring and evaluation is essential. In light of this, JPF also intends to evaluate the capacity and effectiveness of the RM modalities that member NGOs have adapted.

Study Objectives

JPF engaged Trust Consultancy to conduct this study of its TPM and RM processes and modalities in collaboration with JPF, member/non-member NGOs, TPM provider, and stakeholders primarily in Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and South Sudan. Drawing upon this evidence, Trust presented key lessons learned, analyzed challenges and suggested improvements or alternative modalities.

The main objectives of this study were:

- To review the previous and ongoing TPM experiences of JPF and other (non-member) NGOs
- To review the RM modalities and systems adapted by member and non-member NGOs
- To analyze the TPM and RM modalities to suggest improvements and provide options for other complementary or replacement modalities

This study was comprised of two components: (a) TPM Modality and (b) Remote Management Modality. The two components progressed concurrently and entailed the following activities:

Component A: TPM Modality

- Review of the JPF TPM process and experiences
- Desk research on the best practices and good examples on TPM modalities that are applied by other organizations
- Key Informant Interviews with NGOs, TPM Company representatives, bilateral agencies, INGOs and UN Agencies working at the target countries and locations
- Analyzing the findings and comparing with the existing TPM modality to identify improvement suggestions

Component B: Remote Management Modality

- Review of the Remote Management modalities and tools adapted by sample of selected member NGOs
- Desk research on the best practices and good examples of Remote Management modalities that are applied by other organizations
- Key Informant Interviews with sample selected non-member NGOs, INGOs and UN Agencies working at the target countries and locations
- Analyzing the findings and comparing with the existing Remote Management modalities to identify improvement suggestions

In addition to these activities, Trust developed, disseminated and analyzed an online survey to collect information from the broader humanitarian community including non-member I/NGOs, UN agencies and other TPM providers and RM experts about the efficiency and effectiveness of TPM and RM modalities.

Research Questions

This study answers the following questions:

1. What has the experience with TPM and Remote Management by other organizations in the JPF supported countries (Yemen, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and South Sudan) been so far, and what lessons can be drawn?
2. What are the benefits and limitations of TPM in correlation with the cost?
3. Are there alternative approaches to TPM and what could be the ideal M&E approach for JPF and other similar organizations?
4. What are the alternatives RM approaches and tools that can be used by NGOs?

Methodology

Approach and Scope

Trust used a mix-methods approach, collecting quantitative and qualitative data and information from multiple types of sources. This allowed for a holistic understanding of key issues and themes that reoccurred throughout the research process.

As described in previous sections, based on the ToR and discussions with JPF, the scope of the research was primarily focused on RM and TPM in JPF's selected countries: Afghanistan, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. While the primary aim was to understand how approaches, challenges and strategies for TPM and RM varied across these contexts, the scope for data collection extended throughout the MENA region as well as East Africa. This allowed for the research team to consider a broader range of perspectives and experiences to develop findings which have strong relevance to the wider humanitarian community. This aligns with JPF's intention to disseminate key findings and good practices to other actors in this sector, in addition to assessing their own approaches.

Methods and Tool Design

Desk Review

Through the desk review, the research team gained insight into current practices and existing research related to both TPM and RM. Specifically, the research team used the provided TPM documents to investigate potential challenges and issues highlighted in the review of available grey literature and through initial discussions with JPF. These included, but was not limited to, issues related to overall quality of TPM reports, noted challenges during data collection due to COVID-19, access, security and cooperation, how TPM providers addressed issues of objectivity and credibility, and the quality of recommendations. Based on this review, the research team was able to identify specific factors, considerations, and challenges to explore in more depth through the KIIs. The desk review for the RM component entailed a review of the available grey literature on remote management.

Remote Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

The research team conducted 47 KIIs, with 27 related to the TPM component and 20 KII related to the RM component. Key informant interviews explored participants' experiences with TPM and RM, key challenges faced in their application and recommendations for best practice. All KIIs were carried out remotely as participants were operating across a range of contexts in the Middle East region, Central Asia, East Africa, Northern America, and Europe. Participants were selected purposively in collaboration with JPF, and through the use of Trust's own networks within the targeted areas. Geographical area, gender, organizational level, and representatives of local partners were all considered in the sampling strategy. Trust was able to collect data from a varied sample across all intended target countries and a range of actors, including JPF/non-JPF NGOs, TPM providers, M&E experts, Researchers, Program Managers, Project Coordinators, Field Coordinators and others.

Online Survey

To include the perspectives of a broad range of actors from different contexts and involvement with different phases of project design/implementation/monitoring and evaluation, the Trust research team distributed an online survey to the wider humanitarian community as well as JPF members. In total, 80 submissions were received, one-third of which were submitted by females. Respondents primarily worked for I/NGOs, TPM providers or were independent consultants. Forty-four percent (44%) described their role as management. The survey was disseminated on Trust social media channels as well as within JPF and Trust networks using a snowball approach. Respondents were targeted at the individual level as opposed to the organizational level, as a further measure to ensure that varied viewpoints are accessed.

Dissemination Workshop

Following the submission of the first draft of the report, Trust incorporated JPF feedback in preparation for the final report and online workshop. The workshop was attended by a total of 65 participants who had been invited through the JPF network or due to their prior contact with the research study as informants or prospective informants. With this audience in mind, the workshop consisted of a brief presentation of the study's overview and key findings followed by an open format discussion. The discussion was guided by a few suggested themes and questions, based on the lessons learned and recommendations as outlined in the Executive Summary. The course of conversation was however primarily led by the input of attendees. The desired outcome of the workshop was to share the study's insights with TPM and RM stakeholders and invite both JPF members as well as actors from the extended humanitarian community to engage in an open discussion of the related topics in accordance with their own experiences. The annex attached to the report consists of a Workshop and Feedback Summary which details the workshop agenda, key discussion points and suggested areas for further inquiry.

Challenges and Limitations

Challenges Scheduling Interview

Although Trust aimed to conduct 25 KIIs for each component, this number was not reached partly due to limitations related to participants' fluctuating availability. However, given the high number of conducted KIIs, data saturation was achieved for both components. This is to say that the low number of omitted participants are unlikely to have caused any substantial effects to the overall findings.

Limitations due to KII Sampling Methods

While geographical area, gender, organizational level, and representatives of local partners were all considered in the sampling strategy, participants for KIIs were predominantly selected through JPF and

Trust networks. Although this presents a clear selection bias, the Trust team were careful in their considerations and made efforts to reduce any potential bias by selecting a wide-ranging and varied sample.

Limitations due to Survey Respondent Participation

In an effort to ensure respondents felt comfortable participating in the study, participants were given the choice to skip questions. Consequently, the number of responses to questions are varied and may only reflect the perspectives of a certain proportion of the total respondents. While this may present as a limitation, triangulation of the data ensured that the validity of the findings was maintained.

Limitations due to survey sampling methods

The snowball sampling technique used for the surveys was deemed the most appropriate and efficient way to gain sufficient responses from a broad range of respondents within the timeframe given. Due to the lack of randomization, it is nevertheless possible that certain important subgroups were omitted from the sample despite the best efforts of the research team. This problem was reduced as far as possible by a highly comprehensive desk review process which allowed for in-depth scoping of relevant stakeholders. Even given these measures, the non-randomized selection criteria preclude statistically valid inferences at the population level, the resultant descriptive statistics should therefore be utilized with caution.

Ethical Concerns

Unfair Advantage in future bidding

By virtue of the type of research, and the capacity required of an organization to complete this research, there are likely to be instances in which the research team is exposed to information which may result in an unfair advantage in future competitive bidding. In order to offset this concern, Trust has agreed with JPF as a condition of the contract that Trust will refrain from bidding on any JPF projects for the 12 months following contract signing in order to preserve a sense of fair competition, as well as to encourage open answers from respondents. Furthermore, the presentation of a public version of the final report will also allow those findings to be used by participating organizations, in order that any unfair advantage be minimized.

Anonymity

Only those research staff with direct involvement in the project had access to primary data. Respondents were anonymized throughout the analysis period, with any sensitive, relevant data visible to the researchers. During the reporting process, the research team ensured that no such information which may lead to direct identification of individual participants is released in the published report.

Findings

Third-Party Monitoring Findings

Scope of Work (SoW)

JPF's use of TPM is heavily informed by the fact that it partners with member NGOs to meet basic needs for IDPs, refugees and host communities in insecure contexts, limiting direct access. This is in part due to restrictions to access faced by JPF and member NGOs as the Japanese government imposes travel restrictions for its citizens to countries or regions it deems too high-risk for entry. JPF's use of TPM is also informed by the need to maintain accountability to both its primary donor (the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the beneficiaries of the projects it funds. Feedback from key informants and survey respondents demonstrated that a broad range of actors turn to TPM in response to similar concerns.

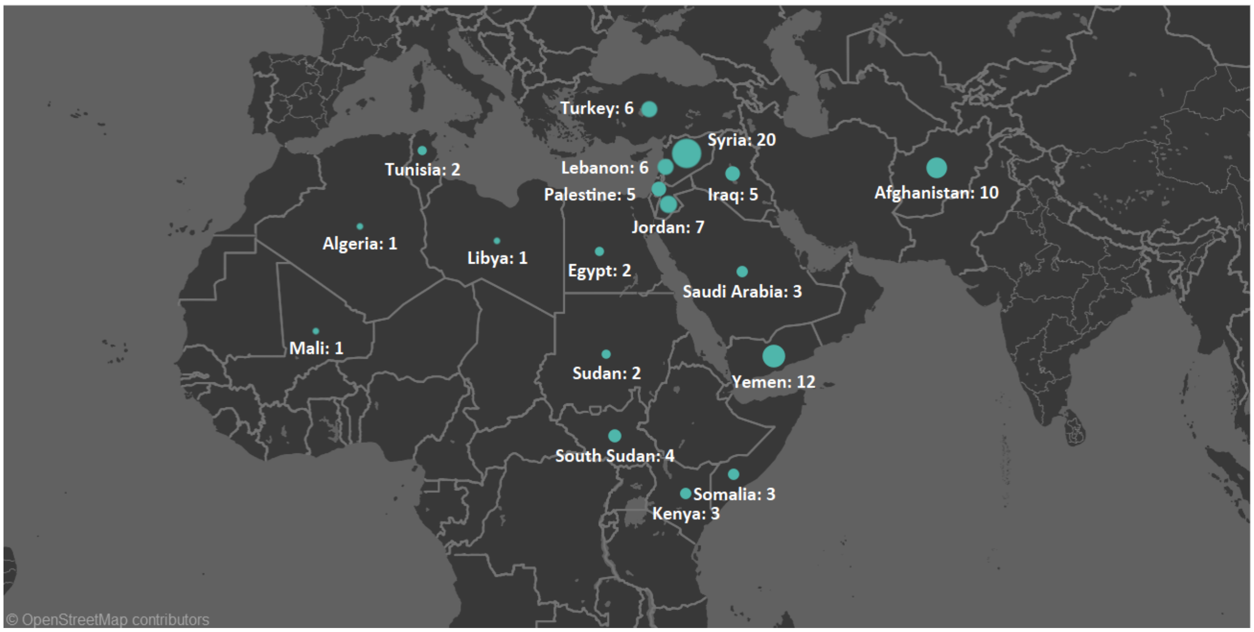


Figure 1: Countries wherein the respondents had experience providing, commissioning, or working with TPM services.

Out of the 57 survey respondents that reported on whether they thought reliance on TPM was increasing or decreasing, 44 described reliance on TPM as increasing somewhat or increasing a lot. When asked which factors were driving the increased use of TPM, respondents most frequently cited donor requirements, desire for greater accountability to beneficiaries, increasingly insecure environments in certain contexts and greater emphasis on learning.

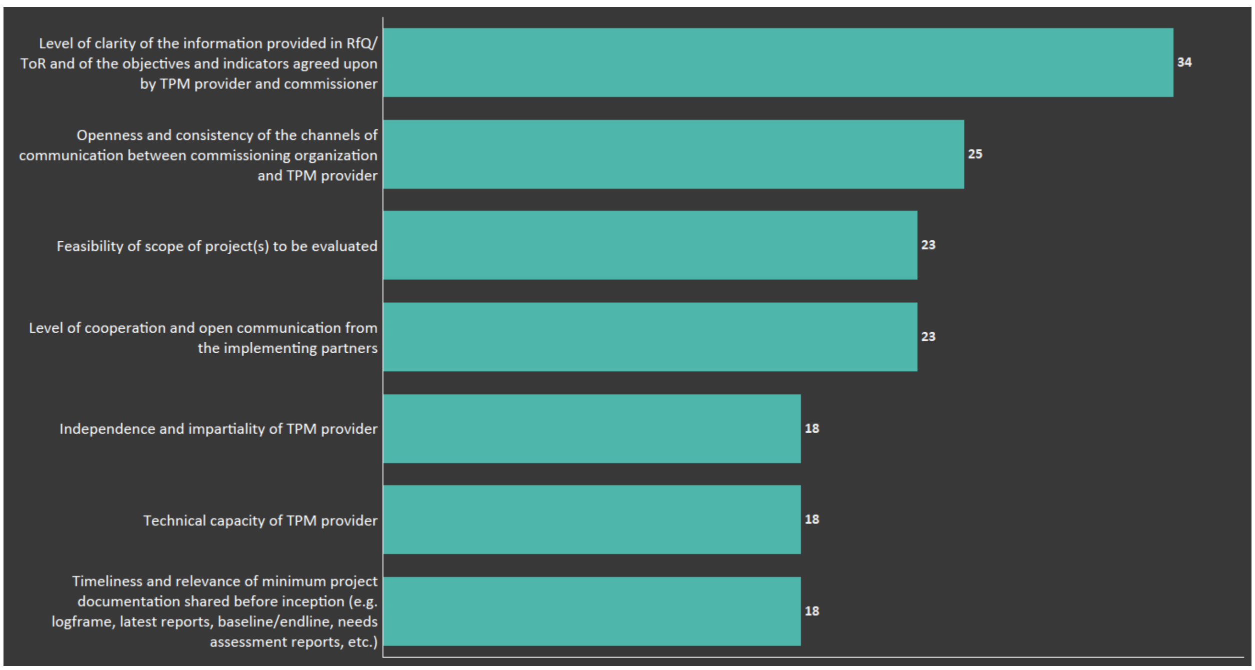
These commissioned activities also aligned with the range of activities that respondents from the online survey selected as appropriately encapsulated within the normal scope of TPM. Among the 55 respondents who described which activities they thought should be included within the scope of TPM, verification of planned versus actual implementation was the most frequently selected. This was followed by verification of humanitarian principles and standards, data collection, and endline evaluation. Similarly, among the 56 respondents who described activities for which TPM had been an effective strategy, its use as a means of verification when commissioned by aid agencies or I/NGOs that work with implementing partners and when used to monitor and verify projects in relation to their basic planning indicators were the most frequently selected. For 36 of these respondents, TPM had also been an effective means to support and strengthen the monitoring capacities of implementing organizations and partners. This study's findings suggested that this particular function of TPM warrants further exploration.

Although the scope of services enumerated in the ToRs analyzed for this study appeared to fall within the typical scope of TPM, feedback from interviews with TPM providers suggests the need for greater clarity on the details of the desired scope of services and appropriateness of specific evaluation criteria and standards to the project activities selected for the TPM.

Three key issues presented themselves in interviews with TPM stakeholders when discussing SoWs. First, there is a need for a more thorough understanding of what TPM entails and for greater clarity on the part of the commissioning entity on the demands of the project.

Figure 2: Most important factors influencing the success of a TPM exercise.

A TPM provider pointed specifically to a need for a greater understanding of how to integrate CHS and humanitarian standards in TPM. Moreover, the level of clarity of the information provided in the ToR, and the objectives and indicators agreed upon by the TPM provider and commissioner, was most frequently selected as being among the most important factors that influence the success of a TPM exercise.



Secondly, commissioning entities' (e.g. donors, I/NGOs) desired scope and allocated resources for the commissioned TPM are often misaligned. Thirdly, TPM providers may accept significant changes to a project in the hope of a continued future partnership and commissioning entities should consider this carefully.

Interviewed staff from a range of NGOs that had been under monitor participated in the process of selecting and hiring TPM providers to varying degrees. Some TPM stakeholders expressed the opinion that implementing organizations should not be involved in this contracting process in order to avoid jeopardizing the impartiality of the contracted TPM provider. While the levels of participation varied during this initial phase, timing of the monitor appeared of great importance to all types of stakeholders and held a significant influence over the success of the TPM. Timing was cause for concern when contracting entities did not align planned TPM exercises with the internal monitoring activities conducted by the organization under monitor. Interviewed NGOs had recurrent experiences of being informed of an upcoming TPM by donors with little notice in advance. Atop of limiting the opportunities for such an exercise to complement ongoing internal monitoring, short notice also caused for complications in regard to project specifics. In one example, a project selected for monitoring that had targeted displaced persons and the beneficiaries were difficult to locate after the project had closed, which was when the TPM was scheduled to commence. Another NGO implementing a construction project shared an experience of having been selected for monitoring by a donor in the middle of implementation, at a time when beneficiaries were difficult to specify and outcomes impossible to monitor. NGO stakeholders stressed the importance of ensuring that those contracting TPM services consider the alignment of the exercise with project cycles based on the objectives of the TPM.

Inception Phase

NGOs under monitor had varying experiences during the inception phase, with some reporting significant challenges and others describing a relatively smooth process. While some NGOs were involved in selecting key indicators and developing data collection tools, others' involvement was more limited to facilitating communication and coordination between the TPM provider and the implementing staff or partner when needed. Satisfaction with the level of involvement varied too, as some NGOs enjoyed being able to shape the evaluation framework, while others stressed the TPM exercise as providing an independent outsider-perspective of the project under monitor, and therefore were satisfied with the development of indicators and tools taking place without inputs from the NGO (and IP). In response to the non-uniform preferences, it is not a standardization of involvement level in the development of indicators and tools that these findings suggested, but instead the prioritization of strong communication during this process in order to align expectations.

Information sharing is crucial during the inception period and contributes to the TPM provider's understanding of the project and implementation context in addition to risk mitigation strategy. Positive experiences that respondents shared involved the TPM provider communicating effectively with partner staff or the NGO's field staff about their experiences during the process of implementation to jointly identify specific concerns or context-related challenges to expect during the monitor. The "openness and consistency of the channels of communication between commissioning organization and TPM provider" was the second most frequently indicated important factor determining the success of a TPM project.

The research study found that sending and receiving documents is one of the most troublesome processes within a TPM projects, and often cause for many complications throughout the monitor. In some cases, significant documents are not shared with the TPM provider in their entirety, or just an executive summary of a key report are sent to the TPM provider. Insufficient project information is a substantial hurdle to TPM exercises and one that can mitigated by ensuring appropriate time for and prioritization of this activity as an essential element.

Aligning expectations is an important part of the inception phase. NGOs Particularly for the monitors of NGOs to whom TPM was new, alignment of expectations of the exercise was crucial. Without knowing what to expect, NGOs with projects under monitor – whether experienced or inexperienced - are poorly equipped to participate or cooperate appropriately.

Context-specific factors were often the root of delays or cause for significant challenges during the inception phase. As this study reviewed NGOs' recent experiences of TPM, a major distinction between these experiences was the emergence and impact of COVID-19. One of the most critical challenges identified in the inception phase was the emergence and impact of COVID-19, as it affected the original on-site data collection plans, which needed to be quickly adapted to remote data collection. However, for some NGOs, the lull in the implementation of project activities due to COVID-19-related restrictions allowed key staff members to dedicate more time to supporting the TPM than they may have been otherwise able to. Some expressed that they would have been under a lot of pressure given their limited number of staff supporting their small organizations.

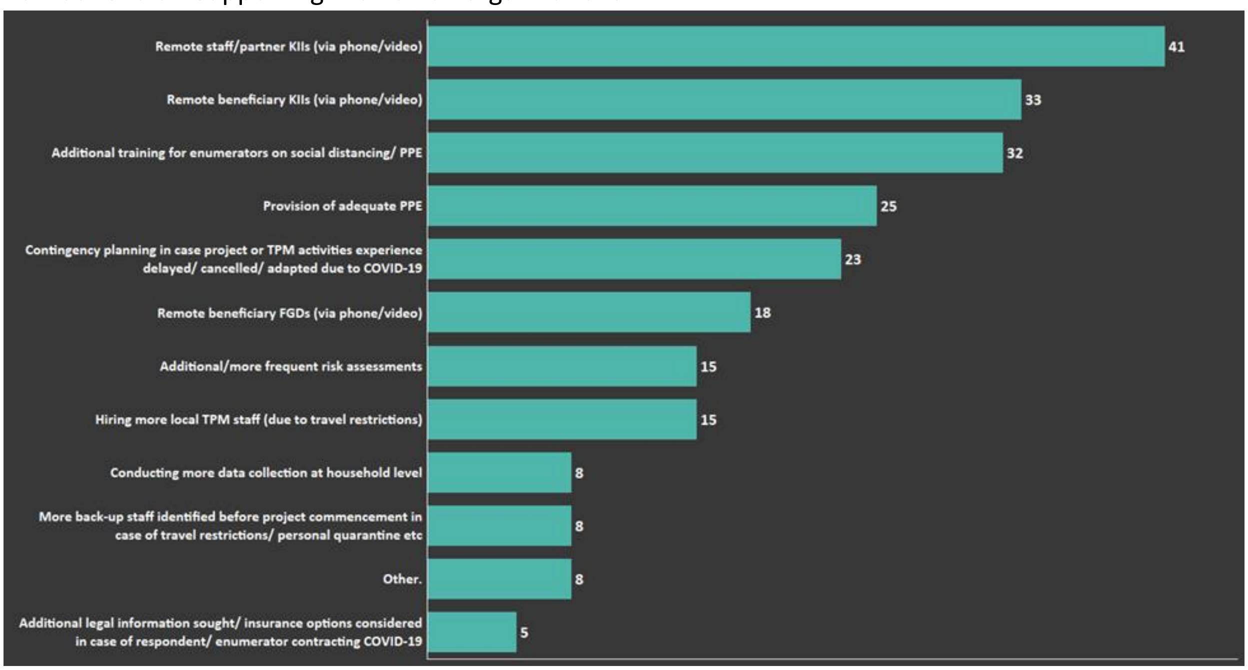


Figure 3: "What types of COVID-19 precautions and adaptions have you implemented in TPM exercises?"

Preparation for Data Collection

During the preparation for data collection, allocation of responsibilities between the various actors was often clear. TPM and NGO respondents agreed all parties expressed that TPM providers assume primary responsibility of the activities when preparing for data collection, and that this allocation of responsibility aligns with the expectations of NGOs. TPM providers thus expected limited support from NGOs during this phase.

TPM providers with gaps in their information had a harder time knowing what exactly to prepare for in the field both in terms of project technicalities and risks, and they also faced more difficulties tailoring their preparations and trainings for the project under monitor. Therefore, perhaps the most important support NGOs can provide preparatory to data collection is sharing documents in a timely manner beforehand.

As in other phases, some NGOs were more involved in the preparatory process than others, and the NGOs and IPs that were more involved provided different types of support. Some NGOs mentioned that they, or their IPs, would contact beneficiaries to introduce them to the upcoming exercise and inform them of the purpose of the study, helping to ensure that they would make informed decisions about possible participation prior to the arrival of the TPM team. The contribution of NGOs and IPs during preparation for data collection often entailed promoting community acceptance, and similar efforts would typically continue throughout the data collection phase.

Some NGOs under monitor expressed that they and their IPs had valuable potential that could have been better leveraged during this phase, had the TPM providers included their insight or advice. These cases showed that occasionally, NGOs and IPs would offer assistance to the TPM provider that they did not perceive as fully appreciated. Such situations may have been the result of a disagreement over the extent to which TPM providers have to maintain a distance from the IP in order to ensure independence, or a perceived difference in who inhabits the highest level of expertise on a certain area. Declining or ignoring assistance from NGOs and IPs occasionally resulted in challenges to the TPM provider which the NGO understood to have been avoidable or believed that impact of those challenges could have been better mitigated. In one situation, a TPM provider had significant struggles with permits during the preparation phase, despite the fact that the NGO under monitor had offered to help the TPM provider through the permit process months in advance. The TPM provider had declined the NGO's offer to assist, and the permit issue resulted in significant delays to the monitoring exercise. Related good practices to mitigate such issues that TPM respondents shared included directly asking the NGOs and IPs about the type of challenges they foresee for the monitoring project, or which they themselves have faced during implementation.

Data Collection

Continuous Communication

Although most NGOs with experience of partaking in TPM interviewed for this study did not report heavy involvement during the data collection period, several respondents recommended that communications between the various parties were nonetheless maintained throughout this phase. While NGOs were not heavily involved in data collection, implementing or local partners frequently were – contributing to varying extents in multiple ways. During data collection, some IPs for example, accompanied TPM teams on the ground to ensure safety and access, or made the first contact with beneficiaries during the data collection activities to ensure that they were making informed choices when agreeing to participate in the TPM. Those TPM providers described the support of IPs as very helpful as they not only knew, often even better than the TPM teams, how to navigate the very specific and often complex project sites, but could also provide project specific information ad hoc during data collection if need be.

NGOs expressed a desire for more communication between the TPM provider and themselves during data collection. One respondent from a member NGO described the common challenge of facilitating communication between their IP and the TPM provider, while also navigating the relationship between the various actors involved in the exercise:

"But it's sort of challenging to keep everyone of the three actors, like [NGO itself, ed.], [IP, ed.], and then TPM consultant on the same page. Like sometimes, [TPM consultant, ed.] didn't share information while they did to local partners. So, I found out new information from my local partner - which was information that was supposed to come from the consultant."

The NGO staff here describes a level of frustration with the channels of communication during data collection because the TPM provider stopped direct communication and instead communicated solely through the IP.

Aligning Responsibilities

While in most cases, the TPM providers appear to carry out data collection without much need for participation from the NGO under monitor, the study found that aligning responsibilities during the data collection was nonetheless cause for some issues. A useful example to showcase this tension was the experience of an NGO staff when the threat of COVID-19 interrupted the monitor's existing plans. While COVID-19 cases were yet unreported in the country where the NGOs project was located, the NGO wanted to discuss the preparatory measures that the TPM provider was planning, in case an outbreak would coincide with the deadline for data collection. The NGO however experienced the TPM provider as "unresponsive" to this inquiry. After weeks of unsuccessful emailing, the TPM provider reached out to ask the NGO to "be ready to prepare". This request was however unaccompanied by any details as to the extent or practicalities of any such preparation. The NGO experienced an apprehension of decision-making and in the end the NGO itself suggested certain measures and contingency plans to be applied. This situation exemplified to the recurrent issue of roles of responsibility not being clearly defined.

Based on feedback from NGO staff and TPM providers, it is relevant to distinguish between responsiveness and participation. Responsiveness was highlighted as important to all parties throughout the process, whereas direct participation was expected to varying degrees. Responsiveness involved parties responding to inquiries, sending required documents, and cooperating with the activities of the exercise. Participation, or active support, happened when partners shared information above the minimum requirements, offered assistance at their own account in the field, or independently offered ad hoc solutions to unforeseen risks or changes in the field during data collection.

Discussing the degrees of responsiveness and participation that will be required of NGOs and possible IPs during data collection, and communicating these expectations beforehand and throughout the exercise, is beneficial to the process. A uniform approach to allocating responsibilities in terms of defining expected levels of participation is not suggested, as the research study found that TPM providers and NGOs have varying expectations to the levels of participation. The communication around such expectations appears more crucial to the success of TPM projects than set levels of either low or high participation. In other words, some NGOs shared that they would have liked to participate through assistance more than they did in the data collection process, while others had expected to participate less than to the degree which the TPM provider expected of them. Some TPM providers likewise preferred a certain distance between the NGO and the TPM exercise once data collection had begun, based in the perspective that high involvement of the NGO would potentially compromise the intended purpose of a "third-party" monitoring. As previously mentioned, other providers noted that high involvement of NGOs during data collection was beneficial to the TPM.

Responsiveness is, however, always crucial and should be prioritized at all stages of the project cycle. The process of receiving necessary documents from various partners is described as a time consuming and troublesome process - one that even delays the TPM exercise frequently. Again here, perhaps a lack of clarity of the role distribution between actors is at play in compromising direct and efficient communication. The documents necessary for a TPM provider from an NGO under monitor can contain sensitive information about the project or its beneficiaries, and if not fully informed or understanding of the value add of the TPM exercise, NGOs may feel reluctant to share these. The issue might also be rooted in more practical matters, as NGOs may not have all the necessary documents immediately available themselves either. Especially if IPs or other partners are involved in the implementation, several links are involved in storing such documents.

Navigating contexts

Although risk assessments, establishing safety procedures, and ethical considerations were important to parties on both sides of the monitoring exercise, the TPM providers often assumed primary responsibility. Accustomed to working in insecure environments, each TPM provider had their own protocols for risk mitigation that they applied to the specific contexts and tasks. While security and risk were important issues, they usually did not pose the main challenges during the TPM exercises reviewed for this study – perhaps as these types of issues are an integral factor in these TPM providers' operations. A strong contextual understanding of projects and project sites by TPM providers is valuable, but the willingness to listen and include the considerations of the NGOs and IPs in the assessment of risk is helpful too. Good practices include integrating the concerns and experiences of the NGOs or IPs who operate in the project context.

TPM providers often highlighted their strategies to promote community acceptance. Most TPM providers explained in detail the measures they apply in this regard: hiring local staff as much as possible, hiring enumerators who speak the local languages and dialects, wearing appropriate clothes, and respecting local customs. Nearly all TPM providers interviewed mention the importance of obtaining informed consent and the emphasis placed on this during enumerator training. Facilitating access by promoting community acceptance was an important factor influencing the quality of the data, as quality relies on good rapport and the comfort of both fieldworkers and beneficiaries throughout data collection activities.

The challenges during data collection in TPM projects are mostly context specific, often phrased as "the context itself". These include access, the climate, COVID-19-related restrictions, limits to technical capacity, or project specific challenges such as locating beneficiaries of projects targeting IDPs.

Analysis and Reporting

Objectivity and Credibility

As with risk mitigation, TPM providers had established procedures on how to ensure accountability, credibility, and high quality during the analysis and reporting phase. Most frequently mentioned were triangulation methods and feedback loops, returning to confirm or re-address certain information from beneficiaries if necessary. Survey respondents indicated the high value of placed on the credibility and objectivity of reporting. Among survey respondents, 42% valued credibility to be of highest importance (ranked 5 out of 5) and 17% valued it as very high (ranked 4 out of 5). Likewise, 32% valued objectivity as being of highest importance (ranked 5 out of 5), while 24% valued the importance as very high (ranked 4 out of 5). Interestingly, there was consensus among TPM providers that the impartiality and objectiveness of their findings and reporting was one of their key added-value to commissioning organizations and their partners.

Factors Affecting Quality of Data and Reports

Underscoring how each phase of the TPM influences subsequent phases, the factors that challenged data collection were found to be the same that affected the quality of data. As already discussed in previous sections, such factors include contextual challenges, such as the limitations to access or technological capacity. TPM providers and NGO staff frequently pointed to tight timelines as a factor that affected the quality of the data and reports. To the extent possible, findings suggested that the timing of the TPM should appropriately with the project cycle as well as consider contextual challenges, such as estimated time to receive necessary permits or the effect of seasonal changes on access. Perhaps the challenge of clear communication here too, ties into the issue previously mentioned of the need for a stronger understanding of M&E and TPM between the parties. Stronger communication around the proposed timing of the TPM exercise may better allow the TPM process to complement the IP's internal M&E processes.

When asked to discuss their satisfaction with the quality of the TPM data and reports, several NGOs expressed that the selected indicators and/or evaluation frameworks chosen for the exercise did not satisfyingly correspond to what they themselves would consider the most beneficial for the improvement of future programming. This may suggest a need for a more in-depth understanding of the project on the part of the contracting entity and the TPM provider. Some NGOs questioned TPM's practical added-value for beneficiaries, suggesting that the current use of certain indicators and frameworks did not necessarily generate data that addressed beneficiaries' interests and concerns:

"My understanding is that they [beneficiaries, ed.] probably don't want to know about if the project was appropriate, and if they're aligned to international framework, they would like to know how their communities changed. So that kind of indicators or evaluation framework could be introduced, that will be more interesting, then, if the scope of the third-party monitoring could shift to that side. It'll be more interesting and more appreciated."

The qualitative aspects of TPM exercises were especially valuable to NGOs that manage their projects remotely or through implementing partners. Gaining understanding of their beneficiaries' satisfaction and "seeing it" from the ground, was highlighted by several NGOs as the TPM's primary added-value.

o some NGOs, TPM findings often did not necessarily offer new information that they had not themselves already gained from their internal M&E processes. However, they explained that the TPM was nonetheless a valuable exercise as it further documented existing and anecdotal knowledge and supported their accountability mechanisms. Satisfaction was especially high among NGOs and TPMs that held briefing meetings following the first draft of the final report, during which possible discrepancies or minor issues could be discussed. Such meetings allowed all parties to reflect on the outcomes and express possible concerns. Importantly, many NGOs reported that most of the challenges they faced concerning the analysis and report were very likely to have been resolved or mitigated through timely and thorough debriefings with the TPM provider and donor or other contracting entity, prior to the submission of the final report.

Donor roles and responsibilities

The recommendation to increase the space for feedback and experience sharing, relates to a cross-cutting finding suggesting the need for more intentional resourcing and awareness/acknowledgement of cost when contracting TPM services. This is especially the case in complex contexts. Many of the respondents interviewed raised this issue by recounting numerous experiences in which they felt that budgets allocated for TPM did not align with the expectations from the donor or other contracting entities.

Increased alignment of expectations requires the contractor to have a more thorough understanding of the project and what is entailed in the monitoring services they require. Such improvements are not only supportive of the maximization of the monitor's outcomes and insights, they further have the potential to feed back into the allocated budget by reducing any efforts that are ultimately expendable. As phrased by one respondent from a TPM consultancy: *"I hate when data is just there for data and someone's just like, "Oh, that's interesting." And it doesn't… It doesn't get used."*

While striving to develop the appreciation or recognition of the value of TPM exercises by the organizations under monitor, the overarching goal of reaching shared understandings should equally include pragmatic appreciations and recognitions from the side of contracting entity. This will ultimately facilitate alignment among all parties in their understanding of the process and purpose of the monitor. While still relevant to individual stakeholders, this finding relates to structural complications intricate to the TPM mechanism in its entirety of the sector and is thus needless to say beyond the control of individuals to curb alone. Nonetheless, stakeholders involved in TPM exercises are expected to benefit from intentional assessment of their own positioning within this structure.

The findings therefore suggest that donors should continue developing awareness of their responsibility in the current structure and acknowledge that TPM (along with the humanitarian/development sector) in its format, is a 'market' containing actors seeking profit and the support of livelihoods. Donors have an important role to play in the mitigation of major risks to the TPM. These include the deterioration of quality, contributions to corruption, lack of independence or transparency etc. Donors may have to adjust their practices following considerate reassessments of their own involvement in, and power over, such dynamics. To be stressed here, is the practice of bidding and undercutting during the tender process. Several respondents discussed at length a tendency for donors to award proposals to TPM entities presenting the lowest budget, although the provider may not have the capacity, qualifications, or sometimes even intention, to effectively execute the SoW. A number of these respondents also suggested some action donors could take such as increasing the weight given to the technical proposal relative to the financial proposal, disclosing the available budget for the TPM, and hiring procurement staff with experience as TPM providers in the same or similar contexts, having a detailed understanding of the relevant costs.

These recommendations may be small practical steps towards promoting high-quality TPM and its value, addressing some of the larger systemic challenges facing TPM. Overall, respondent feedback highlighted that when donors were committed to using the TPM as a learning tool, they are more likely to invest in adequately resourcing a high-quality TPM when able.

Lessons Learned: TPM

The findings of the research study suggest that more support is needed for NGOs to integrate the learnings from their TPM exercises in order to maximize the value gain from these efforts. Building shared understandings between the multiple parties involved in a TPM is crucial to the success of the exercise and the applicability of results. Due to its massive impact in all areas of practice, the power of communication is not to be underestimated and appears to be an area of operation that is always worth improving. The findings have largely focused on the demonstrated and expressed need for thorough expectation alignment, regular check-ins, and consistent debriefings.

Recommendations: TPM

1. Alignment with project implementation cycles and ensuring adequate time for NGOs to prepare for upcoming TPM will address some of the key issues that were reported recurrently. Increased coordination and communication between contracting entities and NGOs about the scheduling and scope of the TPM may therefore increase the effectiveness of TPM exercises.

2. Consider how further developing a shared understanding of the overall purpose and use of M&E and TPM among involved parties may provide increased opportunities for TPM to better complement NGOs the internal monitoring of NGOs.

3. Related to the diverse preferences and considerations informing NGOs' involvement in the development of indicators and data collection tools, strong communication should be prioritized particularly during the inception phase to align expectations rather than promote a particular level of involvement.

4. Irrespective of the amount of experience an NGO may have with TPM, aligning expectations as early and thoroughly as possible appears critical to success.

5. TPM stakeholders should learn from experiences coping with COVID-19 related challenges so far (and leveraging unique opportunities) to further develop contingency plans in the case of new developments regarding the pandemic or other unforeseen challenges.

6. To the extent possible, NGOs under monitor and their IPs should work to promote community acceptance of the TPM provider and their activities by establishing channels for communication

and facilitating cooperation between the TPM and IPs. A number of TPM providers reported that the support of NGOs and IPs in promoting community acceptance facilitated efficient data collection.

7. The degree of NGO participation that is ideal for a given TPM will vary, but all relevant parties' responsiveness was instrumental in cases of the TPM's success and should be maintained throughout all stages of the TPM according to parties' roles and responsibilities.

8. Although TPM providers tend to assume the bulk of the risk as it relates to potential threats and insecurities in the field, all parties involved in a TPM exercise NGOs should engage in good practices of promoting mutual, open channels for communicating potential challenges, risks and mitigation strategies.

9. Consider how contracting entities and NGOs can further leverage TPM and the learnings to enhance beneficiary accountability while also producing findings and recommendations relevant to the beneficiaries themselves. Effectively demonstrating the learnings and value add of monitoring exercises to policy makers and donors could have the positive largescale effect of promoting a more enabling environment to support these projects.

Remote Management Findings

Current Approaches to Remote Management

Within the aid sector, remote management and other uses of remote approaches have become increasingly commonplace as their applications have expanded with developments in information and communications technologies. In some implementation contexts that may be difficult to access or otherwise non-permissive, advances in technological infrastructure have widened opportunities for different implementation, management, and communication strategies.

Figure 4: Countries in which survey respondents have experience with using RM.

Results from the online survey support these observations regarding the expanding use of remote approaches in the humanitarian and development sector. For example, 30 out of the 49 survey respondents who estimated the proportion of their organizations' projects that use some degree of RM reported that at least half of their projects did. For the purposes of this study, remote management was defined as any level of support (e.g. technical training) or control (e.g. project management) that is provided from a secondary location. At least 51 out of 80 survey respondents had previous experience with RM (22 were without data). Just over half of survey respondents who had used RM approaches reported having 1-4 years of experience, followed by 14 respondents with 5-9 years of experience with RM. Only 1 respondent reported having 15 to 20 years of experience. While the respondents' experiences were based in a range of contexts, the majority had supported operations in Syria (21), Yemen (12) and Afghanistan (8), which largely reflects the snowball approach used to identify participants in these target countries. Fifty out of 80 respondents reported that their organization currently relies on remote management approaches for project implementation, verification, monitoring, and/or evaluation.

Among survey respondents, issues related to access, either due to insecurity or remote project locations, climatic challenges, or COVID-19 related travel restrictions were key factors informing their use of RM. The most common RM modality reported (39%) involved approaches where the key managers and decision-makers were located in secondary locations away from the site(s) of implementation, with some decision-making authority passed to in-country actors on a temporary or partial bases. The second most frequently reported modality included approaches where local actors had considerably more decision-making responsibilities on a daily basis as remote teams focused on broader strategy, fundraising, donor reporting and supporting capacity building (30%).

As expected, many key informants described how COVID-19, related travel restrictions and precautions had required a new level of adaptability and flexibility in their management, implementation and monitoring strategies. Similarly, of the 59 survey participants who answered the question on whether the emergence of the global pandemic had increased reliance on RM this year, and 54 respondents said that their reliance on RM has increased either somewhat or a lot since the outbreak of the pandemic (see Figure 5). However, it is noteworthy that while many survey respondents and key informants described some increased reliance on remote strategies, responses also demonstrated that the most participants (or their organizations) were already using RM to some extent so they were relatively equipped to adjust to these challenges.

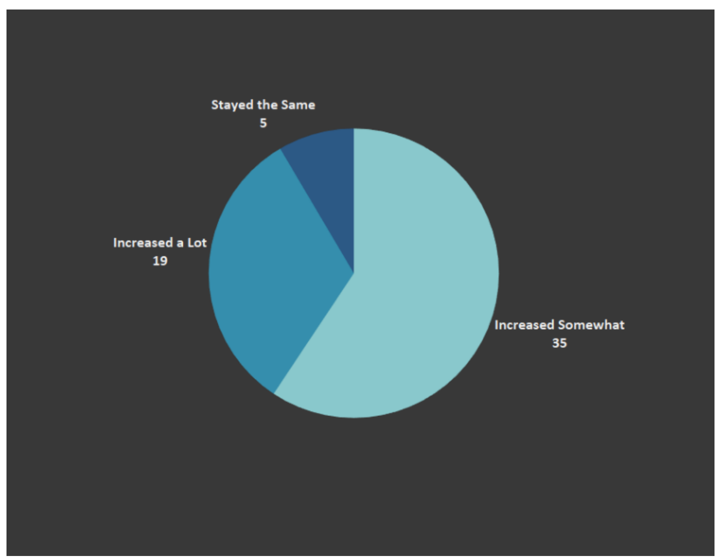


Figure 5: Since the emergence of COVID-19, has your organization increased its reliance on RM approaches?

Staffing and Skills

Some respondents highlighted previous experience with project management in humanitarian or development contexts as one of the most important assets when staffing for RM reliant projects. These respondents frequently mentioned that a combination of technical capacity and local knowledge is ultimately ideal for successful implementation when working with remote management approaches.
While most interviewed stakeholders agreed that experience within the aid sector often is an advantage when it comes to staffing for remote programming or monitoring, a majority of respondents perhaps surprisingly, considered the importance of prior experience more relative than absolute. Other types of professional experiences or skills were instead prioritized higher, depending on the context of operation. For certain contexts, focusing on lengthy prior experiences occasionally considered jeopardizing overlooking or neglecting the value of other types of experience or skill that might be beneficial to the role. Experience with humanitarian or development projects was therefore not necessarily considered a singular factor for success related to staffing to most RM stakeholders in this study.

Instead, a need for heightened attention to so-called soft skills was expressed by a majority of the study's informants. What informants found to be an overwhelming current focus on sectoral experience and technical knowledge during employment processes, was not necessarily deemed ideal for staffing for positions heavily involved in RM. Remote managers reported that personal skills and attitudes were among the most important factors to the success of remote approaches. Self-motivation, transparency, team-spirit, and commitment to the project were among the skills and abilities with the highest value to remote implementation or monitoring. Trust between locally based implementing staff and managing staff in secondary locations was considered essential along with a shared understanding of priorities throughout the execution of tasks and how priorities may change and adapt.

Informants displayed a great appreciation of the importance of open communication. A few managers shared the concern that when remote they were not able to visually see the workload of their staff - if they were struggling with execution of tasks or deadlines, or able to manage much more. Aware of the social barriers built by physical distance, remote managers wanted their staff to "*feel comfortable and confident enough in speaking up if they think something is not being done right*," and "*know that they can say* no *whenever*."

One of the additional factors to the need for employment processes attentive to soft skills, is the dominating perspective that "hard" skills gained through experience and trainings are easier to develop. Soft skills were to a large extent considered attributable to personality rather than professionality, and therefore perceived as beyond the potential of capacity building. This will be discussed further in the following section.

Capacity Building

Following the finding that informal capacities or 'soft' skills tend to be underestimated in their role in influencing the success of remote approaches, RM reliant stakeholders could benefit from capacity building that complements other technical trainings to include practices that foster cultures of good mentorship and peer-learning. Organizations preparing to hire could benefit from not only considering whether, and which of, skills such as self-motivation or patience would be beneficial to their projects, but also taking into consideration their existing teams. Through identifying complementary skillsets and opportunities for cooperation and support, organizations can develop strategies of maintaining diverse staff with skills and personalities that fit the dynamics across HQ, country office and field offices.

Several RM key informants also recommended that organizations reliant on remote approaches share more resources and utilize the many capacity building resources available online. Due to COVID-19, online webinars have boomed this year, and informants shared positive experiences of drawing from the many open training sessions that have spurted this year. Online sessions from suppliers that direct their content for a wider audience were also found to have the benefit of creating forums for members of different organizations to communicate and share best practices with each other.

The findings of the study further suggest that trainings should be adapted to the project and context specific necessities. In some implementation areas, technical trainings of the basics of computer or tablet usage was crucial, while in other areas the most pressing needs in terms of trainings related to addressing different cultural expectations about hierarchical norms in the work environment.

Study participants described capacity building as a continuous process. Some examples of repeated training topics included financial resource management, program cycle management, sessions on ethical issues and their organization's Code of Conduct, as well as human resources management. An NGO respondent shared positive experiences of extending frequent capacity building to include community leaders as well as implementing staff and recommended this practice to fellow organizations. Examples of the subjects of the sessions available to the wider community were conflict prevention, early warning response, DRR, conflict resolution, and mediation. In addition to developing technical and non-technical skills, these inclusive practices were reported to have also substantially promoted transparency and trust between staff and communities.

Fostering a sense of meaningful inclusion among locally based staff was repeatedly mentioned as a factor that strengthens operations. Several informants encouraged practices that empower staff to feel ownership of the projects in which they are involved even while key decisions are made in consultation with (or by) remote staff. Inclusion and ownership are aims to be achieved both in terms of staff members and beneficiary communities and support the sustainability of their interventions' impact. One informant used the metaphor of "working behind the scenes" to describe the value of their inclusive efforts to support local management:

"I think more and more we are trying to work perhaps behind the scenes, building the capacity of local actors, so them themselves can carry out the work. I think in terms of sustainability in terms of local ownership, in terms of even building relations with the communities and identifying proper entry points, and knowing more about the context. I do still believe that there are a lot of gains for let's say for local actors to have".

Although respondents stress that effective communication is stressed was often a challenge in itself, it was also the key to addressing many other common challenges in remote approaches. Study participants emphasized the value of establishing multiple formal and informal channels for communication and decision-making. Informants reported different degrees of success in leveraging remote approaches to facilitate more constructive communication, or foster more inclusive remote work environments, in the context of remote approaches. One relatively simple strategy described by most respondents included the utilization of multiple platforms for communication.

The use of multiple channels of communication (Skype, WhatsApp, Zoom, SMS etc.) allow for both formal and informal as well as more frequent exchanges which was seen beneficial to the overall success of projects and monitoring exercises as well as trust and relationship building. Providing staff with flexible ways of communicating and sharing challenges, solutions and lessons learned strengthens their ability to adapt to changing circumstances as well. Several respondents noted the imperative of facilitating a stronger integration of knowledge gained, from the field level to management, and to create more regular feedback loops to build both individual and organizational capacity.

Sustainability of RM

Strategies

The study's key informants shared a range of perspectives regarding the sustainability of their current use of remote approaches. Depending on project objectives, modalities and contexts, informants intended to continue their current strategies both long-term and short-term. Some stakeholders intended to switch from remote management to more direct management (DM) approaches when dynamics in the field allow for it and as government restrictions on movement are lifted.

Some of the interviewed NGOs who wanted to apply more DM to their approaches, described such efforts as involving a continuous process of weekly HQ meetings to discuss recent updates and reassess how to move forward. While this process is time-consuming, other stakeholders demonstrated the use of similar strategies during planning for transitions from RM to DM all dependent on the improvement of access and security situations in the implementation field. Some reported the creation of "access teams" as a good practice during transitioning. Access teams would be intentional frontline efforts to develop an organization's physical presence on the ground and the first step of a larger strategy to slowly rebuild DM.

In terms of strategy documents to guide the RM approach, few interviewed RM actors had consistent procedures in place. Informants described that their approaches vary in accordance with context and that they made adaptions according to necessity. While perhaps not a structured strategy, this approach has substantial benefits in terms of flexibility – an asset to RM approaches which has also been discussed in earlier findings. 45% of the surveyed respondents said that their organizations do not have strategy documents to guide their remote management, while only 27% said that they did have guidance documents. 21% of respondents of the survey left this question blank, which may suggest that respondents were uncertain of what type of document would suffice as a 'strategy'-document. This could signal a gap across the sector, in which the organizations lack intentional or dedicated strategy documents to guide and improve current RM practices.
The findings from the research study suggest that during any RM approach, micromanagement is not a viable approach. When accounting for positive or negative encounters with RM, informants shared the experience that micromanagement overburdened management staff and lead to bottlenecks throughout projects. With little delegation of authority, staff risk losing trust in each other and field staff risk not feeling included or responsible.

As mentioned earlier, lack of inclusion or ownership among staff can decrease the quality of results, if for example, implementing staff do not comfortable sharing project related concerns or unforeseen issues with the managing team. These issues require particular attention when working with multi-cultural staff with different backgrounds, as expectations to hierarchical levels in the workplace or customs of how to communicate directly may differ significantly. Management systems that lean towards more micromanagement and less delegation, may not necessarily be faulty or deficient, but they have to be intentional. Regardless of the project context or chosen strategy, trust building between staff, maintenance of good communication and intentional delegation of decision-making are key to remote management.

Alternatives

As previously mentioned, a key factor driving the use of remote approaches is the ability to continue operations in areas that are otherwise non-permissive. Locally based staff are essential to these efforts, and appropriate trust and delegation of authority between implementing and managing staff provide projects with a flexibility which is crucial to make timely and well-informed decisions.

Structured and intentional involvement of national staff that are local to the implementation area, is strongly recommended. Having local staff can help to gain community acceptance and participation, and by being more familiar with certain dynamics, local staff can provide HQs with types of information that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. Information-flows from field to HQ are also important in modalities where the weight of authority is mainly located at the HQ. The involvement of communities and the successful inclusion of staff is thus an asset to all remote approaches that is not to be underestimated. Building such relations with both staff and beneficiaries is a critical step towards achieving impactful project implementation.

While any movement towards more DM were considered dependent on contextual developments, the content of project goals and topics also colored perceptions of whether DM was preferable to RM. Projects with activities related to peacebuilding, for example, necessitated a considerable presence on the ground in the view of informants, but not all activities did. In terms of alternative solutions to continue quality monitoring when project areas are inaccessible, TPM was mentioned as an additional measure to ensure accountability and quality of programming. Strong community participation was another alternative method which some informants had had incredibly positive experiences with.

As one interviewed RM actor explained, community participation during the entire cycle of project can increase implementation's success and resilience, uphold accountability to beneficiaries and promote community buy-in. A more practical example came from an informant working with RM in Afghanistan who shared that they had been able to discover serious issues with a local implementing partner through information they received due to local community management and regular communication. In such a case, community monitoring can prove a practical option for effective monitoring when an organization has invested in gaining community trust and building capacity at this level.

Cost-efficiency too related to capacity building at this level. With high turnover rates of international staff in country or field offices, it is financially sensible to invest in the capacities of national staff who are more likely to stay on with an organization for a longer period of employment. The issue at play here – high turnover rates and lacking professional mobility for national staff – relates to wider complications in the aid sector and cannot be solved by the reassessed strategy of a single stakeholder, it is however suggested that making intentional choices with such structural complexities in mind will improve projects' success.

Risk Management

As expected, risk management and safety were a key concern as staff in different locations and carrying out different functions, are often confronted with dissimilar exposures of risk. While a recurrent concern, the research found a prominent awareness of risk and mitigation. Mitigation procedures appeared to be one of the most structured parts of RM programming strategies. No one approach was taken to risk mitigation, but each informant showcased a wide variety of protocols to address issues of risk.

In addition to context specific risks, this year all operations faced an additional challenge of COVID-19. As with other types of risk, respondents displayed a multitude of prevention measures put in place from HQs to project sites. From sanitary protocols to reimbursement of travel to avoid staff's exposure to public transportation, the study found that COVID-19-related adaptations and contingency plans appeared to be well integrated into pre-existing risk mitigation strategies.

In conversation about risk management and awareness, informants often posed a question which appeared to ruminate internally: "Is RM a transfer of risk?". In remote approaches, physical distance between managing and implementing staff can exacerbate real and perceived social distances or hegemonies that have troubled aid sector. Some RM managers seemed to struggle with this dynamic and how to engage with it productively. While local knowledge is invaluable to risk mitigation, how should delegation of authority consider the complexities involved in alignment of risk thresholds and primary responsibility? Risk is not necessarily transferred from one person to another in a chosen RM strategy, but undoubtedly different staff or team functions are may be exposed to different types of risk.

One senior staff member at an INGO stressed the importance of trust and direct communication, but also found that diluting responsibilities related to risk mitigation to multiple levels posed additional risks in itself:

"Every time something would happen, we'd always go to them and say: What should we change? What should we be doing there? And the answer I would always get back from them is, "How can we call ourselves humanitarians if we're not in the places where people need us the most?", and they would always push back to go into even more riskier areas. So, are we transferring risk? I mean, that's a question that we need to ask as well. Now, I would say the answer is sometimes. Yes, if you're insisting that your national staff travel to an area that you don't think you can go to […] I mean they've got a lot at stake. Their livelihoods usually. When you know, they're not an expat who can just leave and go somewhere else. So usually, the grant they have is very important to them."

The quotation here illustrates another dilemma involved in risk mitigation and differences between staff that is uneven odds at stake for international and national staff. International staff are prone to high turnover rates, but the professional mobility of national staff is often dependent on long-term commitment to a single aid agency. National staff might then be prone to accepting more requirements from their managers than they fully agree with, in order to maintain continued employment. Careful risk mitigation thus depends on preexisting bonds of trust in which field staff act from a position of confidence that declining a task (such as entering a high-risk site) will not cost them their jobs.

Leaving the assessment of security risks to field staff exclusively was described as neither ideal nor recommendable. While often having a better understanding of certain dynamics and developments in their region, it is important that efforts are made to ensure profound communication so that managing staff in other locations can trust the assessment of risk on the ground and risk thresholds are aligned:

"Because of course, they [local partners/national staff] are going to get it - they're going to get the situation, but are they going to make the same decisions? That's uncertain. And then what happens if something bad happens? I don't know… I think the simplest way to do that is ensuring risk thresholds are aligned. Give them the ability to lead the discussion, but also make sure that you're not absolving yourself from any other side."

Best practices of risk mitigation include strategies to help the alignment of risk thresholds while developing the field staff an appropriate level of autonomy to make certain decisions by themselves guided by the protocols in place. Clear channels for referral with risk related issues can assist field staff in knowing how to proceed when certain triggers occur and who to contact for support.

Lessons Learned: Remote Management

The findings of this study have stressed the need for intentional and flexible strategizing when relying on remote approaches. To the respondents of the study, the main reasons behind their choice of RM related to concerns of risk and access. Intentions of continuing current styles of management differed widely with some considering RM a last option, and others seeing these practices as practical long-term solutions that may present increased possibilities for promoting meaningful inclusion and localization.

To most respondents however, direct management was largely preferred over remote management, in recognition of the importance being able to physically access sites to establishing relationships with local partners and actors. Considerations of sustainability therefore appear to be a concern to many RM practitioners along with the ethical implications of their approaches. All respondents described their teams and organizations as having numerous protocols and strategies to mitigate risk. These issues and related best practices appear to have been already relatively well-integrated into the sector. Instead, concerns related to capacity building and relationship building appeared among the top priorities.

Similarly, to the Lessons Learned from the TPM component of the study, the findings of the RM component suggest that while there is a widespread recognition that communication is vital to good conduct and all best practices, there is a need for greater exchanges and discussion of what practical steps might be taken in the pursuit of such aims.

Recommendations: Remote Management

6. Feedback from many study participants emphasized that within this sector – particularly in remote approaches – attention to 'hard' technical skills should not neglect the importance of other key motivational and other soft skills, particularly as much work within the sector is highly interpersonal.

Cultivating teams comprised of staff with complementary work approaches and skill sets can help facilitate more effective communication and partnership within and between groups of staff.

7. Investments in strengthening positive and productive 'cultures' wherein open communication is supported should complement technical trainings to develop staff and team capacity.

8. The establishment and use of multiple platforms for regular formal and informal communication within and across teams and partner staff could strengthen the inclusion and involvement at all functions of staff across types of remote approaches.

9. Remote approaches should be adapted to the contexts in which they are applied. Meaningful inclusion of staff across all functions, whether locally or remotely based, is often essential to the success of projects and their sustainability. The challenge here also relates to larger dynamics within the aid sector at a macro level, but awareness of this dynamic and how it plays out in specific remote approaches as executed by individual actors, could be beneficial to overall project success.

10. Study participants whose organizations currently rely on remote approaches demonstrated a high awareness of risk and risk management challenges and strategies. Issues related to risk due to insecurity in operational contexts continue to be key concerns in the sector, although other types of risks were also highlighted. Along with the extensive protocols and dedicated security staff, the feedback received through this study suggested that promoting inclusive practices and open communication are critical to continuing good practices of risk mitigation and management.

Annex: Workshop and Feedback Summary

WORKSHOP AND FEEDBACK SUMMARY

JANUARY 20, 2020
15 – 16.30 JST / 9 – 10.30 TRT

I. Key Discussion Points

'Soft' skills versus 'hard' skills

Several participants highlighted that they had found the finding regarding the value of 'soft' skills particularly interesting. There was interest in defining these types of skills and the differences between them. Workshop attendees noted that one of the relevant distinctions between 'hard' and 'soft' skills was the extent to which soft skills are often associated with certain personality traits (i.e. motivational (self/others)), or gained through experiences both within and beyond a professional sphere, whereas hard skills can be taught and learned through formal education (university degrees, certificates, training etc.) or former work-related experience. Attendees were provided with tangible illustrations of soft skills through examples provided by respondents of the study. Such examples included attributes which are often difficult to define, such as self-motivation, empathy and patience. Importantly, the discussion further stressed that an awareness of complimentary of skillsets within teams, is beneficial according to the study's findings.

Interference and/or lack of acceptance of TPM by local actors

Several attendees expressed interest in issues related to interference or lack of acceptance of TPM by local authorities or the beneficiary community itself. Some attendees pointed to strategies to mitigate these types of barriers, such as ensuring appropriate qualifications of providers and hiring local field staff.

Integrating findings: Feedback loops

There was broad consensus on the importance of integrating lessons learned in both TPM and RM – the need for increased attention to the necessary feedback loops and the advancement of strategies to improve current practices in this regard. The study found that TPM exercises were facilitated more easily by organizations that through their own internal monitoring had gained a strong understanding of M&E. Under these circumstances, the TPM was better able to complement internal systems and monitoring outcomes. This led to the discussion of appropriate timing of TPM, during which participants concluded that all monitoring programs should be an integral part of project programming already at the time of project approval.

Challenges with COVID-19

The group reflected on the research study's findings in relation to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Some attendees shared the challenges that they were facing during this moment. The discussion that followed these examples considered the COVID-19 related findings of the study, where adaptations to data collection methods were the most commonly reported risk mitigation strategies.

Transitioning from remote control to increased delegation

Several comments highlighted the need for more knowledge on how to engage with increased delegation from an initial point of remote control. Practical steps for moving from a position of remote control towards a position of remote support were discussed. The conversation showcased the gaps in this type of knowledge, and the discussion concluded that institutional intention is needed to broaden insights. Given the unpredictable nature of humanitarian crises, implementing staff should be provided with flexibility to manage day-to-day decision-making.

Terminology regarding partners; implementing, downstream, decision-making etc.

A discussion about terminology was raised by attendees in relation to the topic of localization and the necessary dependency on partnerships during both TPM and RM. Workshop participants commented that language is powerful and encouraged fellow stakeholders to be conscious of the terminology they use when describing various partners. The use of some of these terms may be interchangeable or led by a lack of awareness to their innate nuances, but such lack of awareness may lead to unintended displays of the dynamic of such partnerships. The applied terminology should reflect the applied modality, and thus terms such as 'implementing partner' should not banished, but stakeholders should be aware of its connotations. One participant recognized their RM modality to fit the category of "remote control" (which is explained in detail in the report), and here the use of 'implementing partner' may well reflect the delegation of roles and responsibilities within the partnership.

Coordination and quality of capacity assessment of partners

The group reflected on the finding that on the need for more nuanced and comprehensive capacity assessment of current or potential local partners in order to fully assess the potential of such partnerships. This discussion point aligned with the other topics discussed related to localization and potential shifts from remote control to increased remote delegation. Aligning with the study's findings, some workshop participants mentioned the challenges involved in conducting capacity building and the priorities to invest in this.

II. Topics raised as areas for further inquiry

Quality assurance measures during RM

One participant drew attention to the potential issue of quality assurance during RM modalities, which resonated with several other participants of the workshop. While the study directly addressed challenges related to assuring the high quality of TPM, quality assurance during RM was not central to the findings. While there may be an overlap in some of these assurance strategies, it is suggested that more research is developed on this topic for appropriate conclusions to be drawn.

Practical steps for localization

The group reflected the need for strengthened knowledge in relation to practical steps towards realizing localization and potential steps for reconsidering how internal structures may hinder or facilitate efforts to foster genuine partnerships with local actors. This need was echoed in the findings of the research study and addressed directly by several KII respondents. With the interest in greater knowledge surrounding practical steps toward localization, further study into this aspect of TPM and RM is encouraged.

Accountability: How to be accountable to beneficiaries as well as donors?

Accountability appeared to be of particular importance to participants. Workshop participants noted that while accountability relates to responsibilities held towards stakeholders at all levels of a given project, the norm within M&E is to ensure accountability towards donors, with less attention directed towards beneficiaries. Consequently, the question at the centre of the conversation was "How can accountability toward beneficiaries be ensured during RM approaches?". One attendee suggested the application of performance indicators tailored towards the measurements of success as framed by beneficiaries, and another provided an example of donor-community debriefings. These suggestions undoubtedly lend themselves to further inquiry.

How to access the report:

For the purposes of protecting private information and the anonymity of workshop attendees, recording of the workshop will only be available in an audio-only format with no video material attached. The PPTX used for the presentation is also available through the provided link.

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