Monitoring and evaluation in insecure contexts: back to basics?

This briefing note summarises the main findings of SAVE research on how monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems can be brought 'back to basics'. It is based on detailed interviews, data analysis and a document review.

Humanitarian staff working in insecure contexts often feel overwhelmed by the M&E demands of donors, consortia, clusters and their agencies' headquarters; they therefore expressed an interested in exploring how we could bring M&E systems 'back to basics'.[1] To determine where unnecessary complexity existed and where potentially redundant data was collected, the SAVE research team tracked the flow of monitoring data of two international humanitarian NGOs working in South Central Somalia, from the field level to end-users. The research team focused on nutrition data for one of the organisations, and food security and livelihoods data for the other. This involved 31 interviews with staff at different levels of the two organisations, as well as their partners, clusters and donors. In addition, the research team interviewed five donor representatives and M&E experts at the global level and reviewed 30 documents showing the monitoring requirements of various aid agencies. Detailed research results were provided to those two organisations. This briefing note highlights more broadly relevant conclusions.

MAIN FINDINGS

The two NGOs analysed in detail saw the main potential for making monitoring more efficient not in data collection at the ground level, but higher up on the monitoring chain – at the country office, cluster, consortia and headquarters levels. Six issues that were discussed during in-country consultations seemed relevant beyond the two organisations assessed:

1. **Field-level teams often collect more data than required and used at the agencies' regional and headquarters level, as well as by donors, clusters and consortia.**
   This difference was more notable for food security and livelihoods data than for nutrition data, for the latter are highly standardised at all levels. In one examined case, the agency collected a total of 60 indicators at field level, ranging from "household composition" and "access to mobile phones" to core food security indicators, such as the Food Consumption Score and the Household Dietary Diversity Score. The agency's country team considered all of these indicators as relevant for

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1 This was confirmed in a SAVE survey of 197 humanitarian practitioners and donor representatives in Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria. The lack of capacity of partner organisations and the lack of willingness to share data were noted as the top two factors that decrease the effectiveness of M&E systems. These constraints were ranked as more important than other potential hindrances to effective M&E in their context, such as security regulations from aid organisations.

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programming and for understanding the performance and impact of different projects. However, only nine of the 60 indicators were reported on and eventually used by the agency's regional team and headquarters. The number of indicators that the agency is required to report to external stakeholders such as donors and the Food Security cluster was similarly low.

Implications: The small number of relatively standardised indicators requested by higher levels and by external stakeholders provides the country team with an important and valuable degree of flexibility. Where agencies face capacity constraints and/or where concerns about beneficiary survey fatigue exist, country teams should consider focusing on a smaller set of core indicators rather than collecting the full range of information. At the same time, different stakeholders should make a greater effort to make use of and analyse the data collected in the field. For example, country and regional teams could analyse whether the collected data allow for an assessment of the impact of the assistance provided.

2. **Monitoring requirements are not always proportional to the type and size of intervention.** Monitoring requirements tend to be applied uniformly across programmes, without a consideration of their proportionality. For example, it was mandatory for one agency to register all demographic household details and implement a post-distribution satisfaction survey, despite distributing only a very small amount of non-food items. Inflexible monitoring requirements can create disproportionate costs and exacerbate beneficiary fatigue.

Implications: Monitoring guidelines need to be flexible, so that requirements can be adapted to the type and scale of goods and services delivered in an emergency.

3. **Small variations in the format and categorisation of monitoring data required by different stakeholders can lead to large inefficiencies.** Even where indicators are highly standardised (as is the case in the nutrition sector, for example), agencies, consortia and donors often require data to be disaggregated in slightly different ways, using different age brackets and data formats or adding additional options. These differences, while minor, often translate into significant additional work.

Implications: Organisations, clusters, consortia and donors should align their monitoring indicators as much as possible. They should also agree on the exact variables that will be used as the core minimum indicators, or, alternatively, give partners flexibility regarding data format and disaggregation. The commitment passed by aid agencies and donors at the World Humanitarian Summit to 'simplify and harmonise reporting requirements by the end of 2018 by reducing its volume, jointly deciding on common terminology, identifying core requirements and developing a common report structure' is a step in this direction.[2]

4. **The multiplication of different digital tools and web-based platforms creates inefficiencies and hampers data aggregation.** Many agencies, consortia, clusters and donors are currently introducing digital data-entry tools and online databases. These efforts are often uncoordinated, and the various tools are not always compatible, even if they are funded by the same donor. As a consequence, staff often have to enter the same monitoring data several times into different, incompatible systems. Besides creating additional workload, this makes it difficult to reduce double-counting and to share and aggregate data.

Implications: Aid agencies and donors should try to counter this development either by adopting the tool already used by their major partners and stakeholders, or by requesting tool developers to create interoperable systems.

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[2] For additional recommendations, see ICVA (2016) "Less Paper, More Aid" and Caccavale, J. et al. (2016) "Donor Reporting Requirements Research".

5. **Monitoring systems are changed too frequently without giving field teams the time to adjust.**
   When introducing or changing digital data-entry tools and online databases or when adapting indicators, agencies do not always keep in mind that each change requires additional training for field staff. Arranging this is not easy in complex contexts such as South Central Somalia. It requires time that agencies often do not plan for, especially when changes are made frequently.

   Implications: Any changes to existing monitoring arrangements should be carefully considered, taking effects on field teams into account.

6. **At each level, there is not enough communication on the use of data to the level below.**
   At any level, be it affected populations, field teams or country offices, a core source of frustration is the lack of understanding of how the data they provide is eventually used, if at all, for analysis or decision-making further up the chain. As capacities for monitoring and analysis are limited, teams at all levels typically fail to communicate results and related decisions back down to the level from which they received the data. In particular, the benefit of having consortia and clusters as facilitating utilisation and data analysis is often unclear to member organisations. This reduces ownership of the monitoring system and creates the impression that redundant data is being collected.

   Implications: Teams involved in monitoring at all levels should attach greater priority to communicating to their data sources what the results are and how they are used. In addition, management staff needs to involve a wider group of stakeholders, such as field teams, already at the stage of designing monitoring systems in order to discuss and determine collectively which type of data will be collected for which specific purpose.