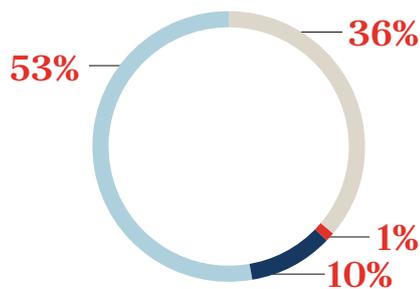


# Eyes and Ears on the Ground: Monitoring aid in insecure environments

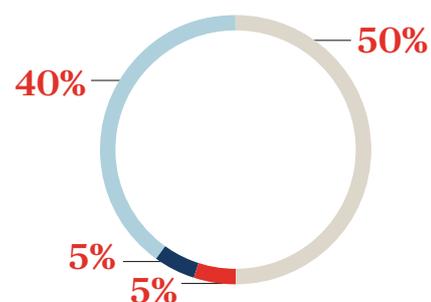
**W**here insecurity is high, it is challenging not only to deliver assistance, but also to assess its reach and effectiveness through monitoring and evaluation (M&E). The three-year Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme analysed different strategies for monitoring aid in Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia and South Sudan in collaboration with 18 learning partners. This paper describes its main findings, based on over 250 interviews, 65 focus group discussions, a review of over 300 M&E documents, and an online survey.

## 1. M&E SYSTEMS IN INSECURE SETTINGS NEED IMPROVEMENT

How satisfied are you with your own M&E?  
(n=140)



How satisfied are you with your implementing partners' M&E? (n=109)



■ *Very satisfied*    ■ *Satisfied*    ■ *Not so satisfied*    ■ *Not satisfied at all*

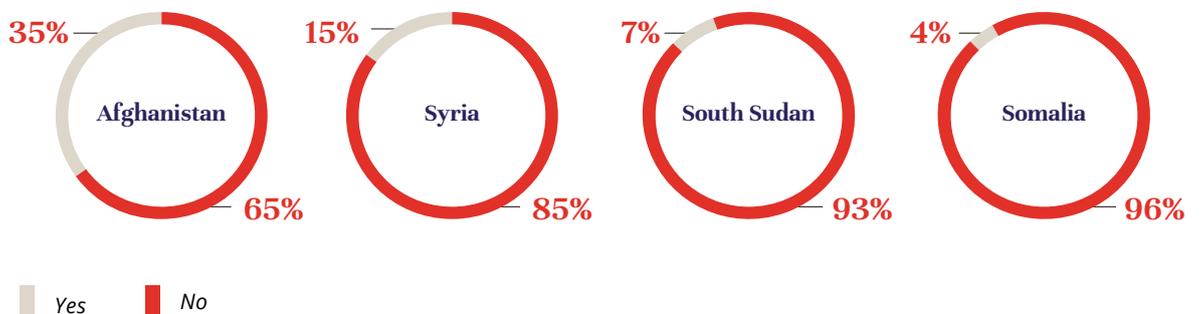
Aid agencies have started to innovate and roll out promising approaches to monitor aid in some of the most challenging environments. Despite this, there remains a widespread perception that M&E systems need to be improved. The farther practitioners operate from areas in need, the more dissatisfied they become with M&E practices. NGOs and local organisations with direct field presence tend to be more satisfied with their M&E. The partners of the same local organisations, however, do not share this positive perception and are often dissatisfied with their implementing partners' monitoring systems.

## 2. MONITORING PRIORITISES ACCOUNTABILITY TO DONORS RATHER THAN AID RECIPIENTS

Current monitoring systems are best suited for creating accountability to donors, measuring and verifying outputs, and providing information to operational decision-makers. Where projects are managed remotely, they become less complex,<sup>1</sup> and donors are more concerned about demonstrating that funds are spent as intended. Therefore, investments tend to focus on introducing additional controls – for example, by using technologies for monitoring or employing third parties to verify results – and many aid organisations are reluctant to share negative findings.

By comparison, current monitoring systems are weak at creating accountability to communities. Survey respondents rated accountability to affected populations as one of the top three objectives of monitoring, but were not satisfied with their ability to achieve this. Over 85 percent of the aid recipients surveyed indicated that they had never been consulted about the aid effort (see chart). Communities criticised aid agencies for relying too much on community leaders or “gatekeepers” and for not involving them in the planning and implementation of projects, and complained about not hearing back after providing feedback.

### Did aid agencies consult you about the aid you received?



Communities appreciated phone and internet-based feedback systems where they work, but noted that these cannot substitute face-to-face conversations. Good practice involves assessing communities’ communication preferences and combining technology with more traditional approaches. The demand for more-direct communication and inclusive programming processes cannot be met with better feedback mechanisms alone. A broader set of approaches is needed in insecure settings, such as providing communities with timely and reliable information on available humanitarian services, and ensuring they know about their rights and entitlements.

## 3. INVESTMENTS IN M&E NEED TO BE BETTER TARGETED AND MORE STRATEGIC

Investments in stronger M&E systems have occurred in all contexts studied. However, they tend to create additional layers of monitoring at agency, cluster, consortium, donor and country levels. Investments should be more strategic to avoid duplication and should target the most relevant gaps.

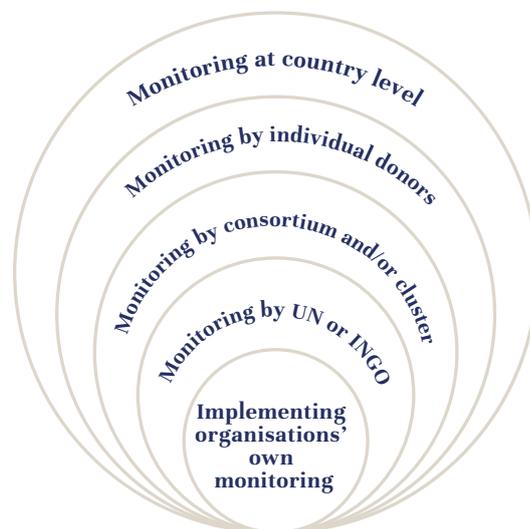
Aid agencies identified capacity constraints as the single biggest obstacle to better monitoring. Strengthening systems and personnel at ground level should thus be the first priority for further investments. Good practice combines verification and capacity development. For example, monitoring and reporting specialists working with the Common Humanitarian Fund in South Sudan help partners design their M&E systems, provide mentoring and hands-on advice, and verify partner reports.<sup>2</sup> Since long sub-contracting chains make oversight more difficult, donors and agencies should invest in more direct field presence where possible.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Stoddard, A. and Jillani, S. (2016) *The Effects of Insecurity on Humanitarian Coverage* (report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: [SAVEresearch.net](http://SAVEresearch.net)); Integrity Research & Consulting (2015). *Cross Cutting Evaluation of DFID’s Approach to Remote Management in Somalia and North-East Kenya – Evaluation Report*.

<sup>2</sup> Steets, J. and Caccavale, J. (2016) *The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism of the Common Humanitarian Fund in South Sudan* (report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: [SAVEresearch.net](http://SAVEresearch.net)).

<sup>3</sup> See Haver, K. & Carter, W. (2016). *What it Takes: Principled pragmatism to enable access and quality humanitarian aid in insecure environments* (Report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: [SAVEresearch.net](http://SAVEresearch.net))

Investments should also encourage data sharing and reflect which functions are best fulfilled at what level. For example, implementing agencies and local organisations close to the ground need to lead efforts to communicate with affected populations. System-wide mechanisms can help aggregate and analyse feedback, and collect overall data on community perceptions. For this to materialise, concerns about sharing negative feedback data with peers and donors also need to be addressed.



#### **4. THIRD-PARTY MONITORING SHOULD NOT REPLACE IMPLEMENTING ORGANISATIONS' OWN MONITORING**

Aid agencies, especially UN agencies and donors, increasingly contract third parties to verify and collect monitoring data. This can provide valuable information where access for own staff is limited, but it has significant downsides.

Aid agencies were often dissatisfied with the quality of data and reporting by third-party monitors, and underestimated the time and effort needed to make such arrangements work. They also risked damaging their reputation due to inappropriate behaviour by external monitors and weakening their links to communities.<sup>4</sup> Agencies should limit third-party monitoring to exceptional situations and avoid replacing their own monitoring systems.

#### **GOOD PRACTICES FOR THIRD-PARTY MONITORING**

- Ensure adequate capacity is in place for selecting and training monitors.
- Invest in internal systems for using data from third-party monitoring and getting it to decision-makers.
- Further develop the use of technological devices to increase control over field monitoring.
- Jointly assess security risks for monitors and existing security systems of third-party monitors.
- Coordinate use of third-party monitoring among peers, and exchange on emerging lessons.
- Limit primary reliance on third-party monitoring to exceptional areas with constrained access.
- Regularly reassess third-party monitoring, and invest in access strategies to return to (more) internal monitoring.

#### **5. TECHNOLOGICAL TOOLS CAN ADDRESS MONITORING CHALLENGES, BUT BRING NEW RISKS**

Aid agencies have developed and tested a number of technological applications to improve the quantity and quality of monitoring. These offer valuable ways of collecting, aggregating and analysing an ever-growing amount of data. However, armed groups often associate technologies with spyware and restrict their use, creating security risks for staff and aid recipients. There are also important challenges concerning the use and sharing of data, and aid agencies should develop policies to ensure that technologies are applied responsibly. The SAVE toolkit on Technologies for Monitoring in Insecure Environments summarises experiences made to date and can inform such policies.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Sagmeister, E. and Steets, J. with Derzsi-Horvath, A. and Hennion, C. (2016) *The Use of Third-Party Monitoring in Insecure Contexts: Lessons from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria* (report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: [SAVEresearch.net](http://SAVEresearch.net)).

<sup>5</sup> Dette, R., Steets, J. and Sagmeister, E. (2016) *Technologies for Monitoring in Insecure Environments: A Menu of Options* (report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: [SAVEresearch.net](http://SAVEresearch.net)).

## ENHANCING MONITORING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

- Mobile phones can broaden the reach of feedback systems, but provide little feedback on sensitive issues such as diversion.
- Digital data-entry applications save time, enhance data quality and speed up transmission and analysis.
- While satellite imagery is still rarely used, it can provide independent data and support situation and impact monitoring.
- Movement tracking devices can help identify and prevent diversion.
- Radio can inform communities with interactive programme formats.
- Social media and online platforms offer an alternative where phone networks are not working, but internet is available.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

**Current levels of monitoring are perceived to be insufficient.** Better M&E does not have to be more expensive, but needs to be better targeted and more strategic. To improve M&E in insecure settings, aid professionals tend to create additional layers of monitoring at agency, cluster, consortium, donor and country levels. There should be more strategic and collective decisions regarding the monitoring functions needed at each level as well as the appropriate overall level of investment.

**Current monitoring is driven by accountability to donors rather than to aid recipients.** More-inclusive programming can be encouraged by donors and supported by third parties collecting data on community perceptions. Communication efforts, however, need to be led by implementing agencies and local organisations close to the respective populations.

**There needs to be more support for the development of capacity in national and international implementing agencies working close to the field.** Capacity gaps are the main obstacle to better monitoring. Strengthening systems and personnel at the ground level should be the first priority for further investment. Donors and implementers should invest in establishing as much direct field presence as possible. Long sub-contracting chains make effective oversight more difficult.

The decision to provide assistance in highly insecure environments is a risk shared by donors and their partners. **Donors should reward partners for being transparent about good and bad results, rather than for keeping an appearance of total control and accountability.**

## FULL REPORT

For more information and to cite this work, please refer to the full report: Steets, J., Sagmeister, E., Ruppert, L. (2016). Eyes and Ears on the Ground: Monitoring Aid in Insecure Environments. (Report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: [SAVEResearch.net](http://SAVEResearch.net))