

# Beyond the Numbers

How qualitative approaches can improve monitoring of humanitarian action

Amelie Sundberg



**MONITORING &  
EVALUATION**

 **ALNAP**

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ALNAP is a global network of NGOs, UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/Crescent Movement, donors, academics, networks and consultants dedicated to learning how to improve response to humanitarian crises.

**[www.alnap.org](http://www.alnap.org)**

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## Abbreviations and acronyms

<b>ALNAP</b>	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
<b>AAR</b>	After-action review
<b>CHS</b>	Core Humanitarian Standards Alliance
<b>FGD</b>	Focus group discussion
<b>M&amp;E</b>	Monitoring and evaluation
<b>PLA</b>	Participatory learning and action
<b>PRA</b>	Participatory Rural Appraisal
<b>RTE</b>	Real-time evaluation
<b>UN</b>	United Nations

## Key to design features

### Icons



Definition



'Good enough' approach example



Keep in mind



Tip

# Introduction

A recent ALNAP Scoping Paper found that many humanitarian agencies still struggle to apply qualitative approaches to monitoring (Warner, 2017). Previous research has also highlighted the persistent challenges that humanitarian practitioners face in the capture or use of qualitative monitoring data (Hofmann et al. 2004; Prowse, 2007; Guerrero et al. 2013; Bond, 2014; Knox-Clarke and Darcy, 2014; Brown and Johnson, 2015; Jansbury et al. 2015; Development Initiatives, 2016; Stern and de Roquemaurel, 2017; Venables, 2017; Warner, 2017). These challenges have manifested themselves in two ways. On the one hand organisations see qualitative approaches as cheap and quick and the data easy to collect. They rely on just a few familiar methods which results in research design and sampling that is often of poor quality (Knox-Clarke and Darcy, 2014). On the other hand, practitioners often express that they lack the confidence, skill and time to analyse and report qualitative results.

While discussion about these challenges is not new, humanitarian organisations have been starting to direct more investment to improving capacity for qualitative approaches to monitoring. This is taking the shape of guidance, trainings, data management systems and even team structures. These organisations recognise that qualitative information plays a critical role in developing a wider understanding of context, culture and the changes caused by humanitarian programming. This knowledge base informs and shapes decisions over time, whether through a gradual osmosis of tacit information and experiences, or in reaction to a specific set of data or evidence generated.



### **Definition: Qualitative approaches to monitoring in humanitarian action**

Qualitative approaches to research seek to explore and describe social meanings and perceptions of phenomena (Flick, 2002). Qualitative data includes information that does not relate numerically. It is often textual but does not have to be (Saldana, 2011). Opinions on whether food is sufficient, for example, constitute qualitative data.

Quantitative data includes counts or measures that have a numerical relationship to each other, so anything that is expressed in numbers, frequencies, rates or proportions. For example, the number of meals eaten daily is quantitative data. However, the numbers on a football team's T-shirts do not have a relationship to each other: the average of the numbers does not mean anything. Therefore, this is not quantitative data, even though they are expressed numerically.

This paper distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative data versus quantitative and qualitative methods. Data is the underlying nature of the information while a method is the way in which the data is treated – either how it is collected or how it is analysed.

Importantly, quantitative methods can express qualitative data in a numerical manner. For example, a survey might present an average score on a likert scale regarding opinions on the sufficiency of food distributions. This is a quantitative method because it involves collecting numerical scores on a scale and providing an average. But it is qualitative data because the individual scores given by the likert scale do not relate to each other numerically. Rather, the data pertains to people's opinions.

There are many different approaches to qualitative methods. Monitoring in humanitarian settings mostly rely on focus group discussions (FGDs), 'additional' open-ended question surveys such as in post-distribution monitoring (PDM), feedback through accountability mechanisms and field observations of quality of programming.

### **“Humanitarian agencies are in fact collecting more qualitative data than they think they are.”**

This paper seeks to highlight that there are many 'good enough' qualitative approaches to monitoring that are useful in humanitarian settings, depending on the purpose of the data collection (Cornish and Skovdal, 2015; Emergency Capacity Building Project, 2007). Humanitarian agencies are in fact collecting more qualitative data than they think they are. But much of both the explicit data and implicit knowledge is 'lost' when humanitarian organisations face high staff turnover, and little of the recorded information is transferred well between stakeholders (whether at the individual or organisational level). As a result, data that can be highly valuable for more holistic and longitudinal analysis or evidence-generation falls through the cracks. 'Good enough' approaches to monitoring can help to harness and use much of the data that is currently being lost.



### **Definition: Monitoring in humanitarian action**

Humanitarian organisations typically consider monitoring to be the continuous and systematic gathering of data and information to track project progress against objectives, to measure performance and quality, and to monitor changes in context that might affect a project (Warner, 2017).

Monitoring is not always synonymous with research. Research looks to test hypotheses and generate evidence that can be used 'across space and time' (Cornish and Skovdal, 2015: 14).

Typically, research uses international academic standards of what is considered best practice to yield reliable results. Monitoring activities can implement research but can also implement appraisals. Appraisals are less rigorous, cheaper, more flexible – and inform real-time decision-making for a specific context. Qualitative approaches to monitoring can be applied either within the framework of research or appraisals. Both can be used at different times to monitor the same project and are sometimes even run in parallel. Understanding when qualitative research or qualitative appraisals are valid and useful for monitoring depends on the scope and purpose of the data collection and constraints of the operating environment, as well as the resources and capacity available to collect this data.

To fully delineate which qualitative approaches can be considered 'good enough', Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems need to revisit their understanding of what qualitative data looks like, why it is valuable and how it should best be collected.

Current understandings of best practice for implementation and use of qualitative approaches in the humanitarian sector borrow standards from the academic world. This paper recognises the time and skill it takes to conduct qualitative research to academic standards – believing this can be possible even in humanitarian contexts (Venables, 2012). But only looking at qualitative approaches to monitoring through an academic lens is limiting a more nuanced understanding of how qualitative approaches can be used for monitoring (Brikci and Green, 2007; WFP, 2009; ACAPS, 2012; STC, 2014; ALNAP, 2017; CARE International, 2017; ICRC, 2017; Dzino-Silajdzic, 2018). There is a gap between what is understood to be robust enough qualitative data to use as evidence for decision-making and the reality of collecting good-quality data on the ground in humanitarian settings. As such, many of the qualitative tools and systems used in monitoring of humanitarian action are not often fit for purpose. Other, less rigorous methods and tools can catch much of the qualitative data that is currently lost and put it to good use for monitoring needs.



This Issue Paper looks at potential ways to improve the capture and uptake of qualitative data in monitoring of humanitarian programmes. The first section of the paper dispels three pervasive myths about the use of qualitative approaches in the humanitarian sector. The second section of the paper identifies promising practice used by humanitarian agencies when monitoring their programmes. This section should provide readers with ideas on how they can improve their qualitative approaches to monitoring within their own organisation. They should be considered as a menu of options to try depending on the varying context, capacities and monitoring needs of organisations, projects and teams.

This Issue Paper is one of a three-part series of ALNAP Issue Papers, 'Monitoring in Humanitarian Action'. These three papers address specific challenges to monitoring humanitarian action as identified by ALNAP Members in the previous Scoping Paper (Warner, 2017; Dillon and Sundberg, 2019; Sundberg 2019). The series of papers look to inform humanitarian practitioners interested in using qualitative approaches for programme results monitoring, including M&E advisors and managers, technical sectoral leads and programme decision-makers.



Photo credit: The Loushe/Flickr.



## Process and method

This paper is one part of a series of research products developed by the ALNAP Secretariat on monitoring of humanitarian action. The series began with a scoping paper that describes current practice and associated challenges (Warner, 2017). This work helped identify a range of issues for improvement within the monitoring systems observed. In 2017/2018, the ALNAP Secretariat consulted its members to select the critical challenges that require further research. Four issues were identified:

- Limited ability to measure outcomes in a meaningful way.
- Capacity constraints regarding the capture and use of qualitative data by monitoring teams.
- An absence of tools for sharing good monitoring practice within and across organisations.
- Limited use of M&E information to support project decision-making and learning.

Each of these issues was investigated further through independent research components. The outputs and related resources are available on the ALNAP website at [alnap.org/me](http://alnap.org/me)

This paper tackles the second of these four challenges. The methodology was designed to capture trends and common current practice across M&E practitioners and programme decision-makers working within the ALNAP Membership. The intention is to offer a common starting point for discussion as well as to put forward some potential tools and solutions to address the challenges faced in qualitative approaches to monitoring. The paper is not intended to be, and should not be read as, representative of all actors in the sector. It should not be assumed that the tools and approaches discussed in the paper do not have their own limitations.

The scope of this paper was defined by one overarching research question:

**How can qualitative monitoring data be used more systematically and effectively within humanitarian decision-making?**

The methodology for the study was based on the following structure of data collection activities:

**1. Literature review**

- A review of 21 humanitarian monitoring guidance documents. The researchers applied a set of criteria to select a sample of the guidance assumed to be of the highest quality to review.<sup>1</sup>
- A review of academic and grey literature pertaining to the subject, identified through snowballing.

**2. Key informant interviews with senior M&E advisors and experts<sup>2</sup>**

- 27 interviews with global- and regional-level monitoring practitioners across a spread of Membership constituents (international non-government organisations (INGOs), United Nations (UN) agencies, and Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement).
- 13 interviews with qualitative experts ranging from private sector practitioners, evaluation consultants and academics to third-party or independent humanitarian monitoring service providers.
- Finally the research team shadowed an M&E training workshop hosted by a Member in Istanbul for their project and M&E managers in the Middle East and North Africa region.

**3. Case studies**

- 5 mini case studies with purposefully selected country programmes, in Tonga, Haiti, Nigeria, Pakistan and Bangladesh.
- 2 case study visits with country programmes in Uganda and Lebanon.

**Limitations**

Some humanitarian actors are not ALNAP Members and not all Members were available to engage in the study. As a result, the paper cannot provide a comprehensive or representative picture for the whole sector. Nevertheless, a broad sample was sought to account for variance in organisational characteristics.

1. Criteria were: inclusion of a definition, explanation of the value of qualitative approaches, listing data collection methods, explaining how to apply data collection methods, providing examples of data collection tools, listing analysis methods, explaining how to apply analysis methods, providing examples of analysis tools and references to external sources.  
2. These interviews were anonymised and therefore have not been referenced in this paper.



**Dispelling  
myths  
around  
qualitative  
approaches**

# 1 Dispelling myths around qualitative approaches

There is a pervasive perception among humanitarian practitioners that quantitative measurements carry more weight as evidence than qualitative data (Knox-Clarke and Darcy, 2014; Warner, 2017) (see the distinction between quantitative and qualitative data explained on page 11). This is for two reasons. First, monitoring systems often prioritise donor reporting, which is dominated by results-based management structures that are overwhelmingly expressed numerically (Hofmann et al., 2004; Hatton and Schroeder, 2006; Mayne, 2007; Talbot, 2007; Hulme, 2010; Guerrero et al., 2013). Second, interviews for this study identified that there is a tendency in the sector to prefer quantitative results due to the belief that statistical measurements are more scientific than qualitative ones. There is an assumption that qualitative data is anecdotal and therefore cannot be trusted as reliable evidence against which to justify decisions. This lack of trust is amplified when, as is often the case, the data collected by humanitarian M&E teams is not high-quality (Knox-Clarke and Darcy, 2014).

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**“Quantitative approaches to monitoring in humanitarian settings typically rely on counting of outputs and administering surveys. Although these approaches have their time and place, they cannot help us to explain changes as a result of programming.”**

It is important to challenge this myth and recognise what qualitative approaches can offer that quantitative approaches cannot. Quantitative approaches to monitoring in humanitarian settings typically rely on counting of outputs (activities) and administering surveys. Although these approaches have their time and place, they cannot help us to explain changes as a result of programming. Inherently, output-counting can track delivery of assistance, but it cannot tell us anything about the quality or relevance of that assistance. In turn, surveys in humanitarian settings are seldom able to achieve true randomised and statistically representative sampling due to a combination of limited capacity and constrained access in dynamic and conflict-affected contexts. Analysis of results is therefore

most often unable to generalise across a population group or draw reliable correlations between variables to help explain cause and effect behind any results (Prowse, 2007; Brown and Johnson, 2015; Development Initiatives, 2016). For example, one UN agency has been collecting quantitative scores on the same indicator for years in the hopes to discover trends over time, but is finding that ‘the numbers alone don’t mean much’. This is in part because quantitative approaches can only provide measurements of the ‘tangible’ data points that have been included in a tool; they are unable to capture intangible or unanticipated – and potentially critical – information.



### **Definition: The distinction between quantitative and qualitative data**

Generally, quantitative variables are counts or measurements that have a relationship to each other while qualitative variables can be placed into non-numeric categories. While all descriptions in the latter can be assigned a code or number, the number itself does not mean anything (Russell Bernard, 2017). For example, numbers of houses on a street are not mathematical in their relationship, they are just a label (i.e., you cannot calculate the average house number). Similarly, a likert scale is often a quantitative treatment of qualitative data; the numbers in the scale do not mean anything but it is a way to organise subjective perceptions, behaviours or attitudes. This can be compared to counting the number of times someone did something in a day. The principle is the same, whether you apply scales before collection or during analysis.



Photo credit: Thomas Omondi/DFID.

## 1.1 Understanding the power of qualitative approaches

Qualitative approaches have an ‘explanatory power’ in comparison with quantitative methods (ICRC, 2017: 16), which can help to identify what needs to change to improve programming. Therefore, they should play a significant role in humanitarian decision-making and adaptive management (Bond, 2014).

Currently, humanitarian guidance on monitoring recognises that qualitative approaches can be used to triangulate other information sources, to capture unanticipated changes and to encourage inclusive and participatory humanitarian action (Brikci and Green, 2007; WFP, 2009; ACAPS, 2012; ICRC, 2017). Moreover, ‘the interpretation of all quantitative data is based on qualitative judgement’ (WFP, 2009: 2). Yet, qualitative approaches in humanitarian monitoring are seen as intimidating and seldom presented as critical for use as evidence or measurement of results.

To give a sense of what is required to achieve rigorous qualitative results, an academic researcher interviewed for this paper explained that they might spend up to eight months planning and conducting a small study and report. Systematic analysis is ‘arduous and time-consuming’; an hour-long focus group discussion (FGD) can take more than a day to transcribe, and the researcher needs to read through the resultant document multiple times to manually code the emerging themes. While software can manage large amounts of data, it cannot replace this process of transcription and coding. As such, it can take weeks to analytically compare several FGDs. Notably, in terms of expertise, private companies specialising in qualitative research services primarily hire individuals with degrees in research methods.

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**“In recent years, there has been an exponential increase in efforts to set standards and raise capacity specifically for qualitative approaches to monitoring.”**

Despite the time and effort that it takes to apply qualitative approaches well, not including them as evidence is a missed opportunity. The qualitative methods typically used in humanitarian settings require purposive sampling that deliberately selects the most appropriate cases for the questions being monitored (ALNAP, 2016). This can often be a more relevant approach in humanitarian crises that face constraints to population data, access, security and time – if sampled correctly, this data is still representative of a group of people and it provides valuable information about different explanations within (and between) groups.

Despite the perception that qualitative approaches are ‘nice to have’ but not essential on the competing list of humanitarian priorities, there is a growing interest among, and pressure on, organisations to apply such methods. In recent years, there has been an exponential increase in efforts to set standards and raise capacity specifically for qualitative approaches to monitoring (MSF, 2005; ACAPS, 2012; STC, 2014; CARE International, 2017; ICRC, 2017; CRS, 2018; WFP, 2019). This may reflect the learning culture of individual organisations, but other forces are also at play.



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**Qualitative  
approaches have an  
‘explanatory power’.**

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The drive for ‘accountability to affected populations’ (AAP) across the sector is encouraging organisations to implement feedback mechanisms and community participation processes. The Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS) Alliance<sup>3</sup> has over 240 member organisations that have all committed to follow certain standards to improve the quality and accountability of their assistance. A number of donor governments now even ask implementing organisations to be a member of CHS in order to be eligible for their funding (Danida, 2017). This includes consulting with crisis-affected and vulnerable communities on their satisfaction with humanitarian programmes and interventions at regular intervals. The tools used for this are predominantly qualitative in nature, such as written forms and telephone hotlines for feedback, and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques such as sorting and ranking for participatory programming (Brown et al., 2002).

The past few years have also seen an increasing number of donors asking partners to incorporate qualitative indicators into formal M&E systems, often in the shape of perception-based or quality outcome-level indicators that are expressed in quantitative terms (GAC, 2016; BPRM, 2018). More broadly across the humanitarian sector, organisations and sectoral coordination bodies are exploring subjective measures that include such things as perception-based data to report on outcomes. This is especially true for organisations grappling with how to understand behaviour-change outcomes and concepts such as protection and resilience (OECD, 2012; Development Initiatives, 2016; Field et al., 2016; ALNAP, 2019).



Photo credit: Mulkanoor Dairy Cooperative.

3. See <https://www.chsalliance.org/who-we-are>

## 1.2 Understanding what qualitative data is — calling an apple an orange

As subjective measures are often reported numerically (Guerrero et al., 2013), most humanitarian practitioners confuse them for quantitative information. In part this boils down to a confusion in the sector between qualitative data (i.e. the type of information being collected) and qualitative approaches (i.e. the way the data is treated or analysed). Too often, individuals fail to understand that while most of the outcome indicators used by humanitarians are qualitative in nature, they are treated quantitatively. For example, a percentage of people feeling safe is a qualitative nature presented as a quantity. The majority of general M&E guidance does not define qualitative data, but those that do tend to distinguish it from quantitative data in terms of textual narrative versus figures. A typical description equates the data with the method by which it is collected or analysed. For example: ‘Quantitative data refer to numerical responses or responses that can be coded, such as “yes/no” questions. In contrast, qualitative data are longer responses or discussions’ (Hagens et al., 2012: 44). The more qualitative-focused guidance nuances that qualitative responses can be quantified or collected through qualitative methods (WFP, 2009; ACAPS, 2012; STC, 2014; ICRC, 2017). However, these texts seldom break down in clear, user-friendly terms what this looks like in practice.



### Keep in mind: Difficulties with definitions

The questions and discussions raised by staff during the M&E workshop in Istanbul demonstrate that these definitional concepts can be difficult for practitioners to grasp. Staff at the workshop assumed that they need to report only quantitative results. They felt that they were unable to design what they call ‘qualitative’ indicators because they were of the understanding that these indicators would need to be reported textually as a narrative.

### 1.3 Understanding the amount of qualitative data that is already captured

Many organisations are failing to utilise a lot of qualitative data that they are already collecting because it does not match their view of what ‘evidence’ looks like. Subsequently, much of this data is not gathered in a consistent or structured manner and so it cannot be used effectively for M&E purposes (Bamberger et al., 2016). Typically, organisations collect responses to open-ended questions in post-distribution monitoring surveys that are rarely categorised and analysed. Feedback gathered through accountability mechanisms and community engagement is not always analysed systematically for project monitoring purposes.

Field staff observe programming and interact with affected populations daily – albeit it in a completely unstructured manner – which over time yields tacit, ethnographic knowledge (Silverman, 2010; Russell Bernard, 2017). Even in cases where descriptive notes are taken, they are seldom archived or shared systematically. While significant data collection may be also carried out by non-M&E staff for project implementation purposes (such as protection monitoring or livelihoods counselling), this is not always shared across programmes for broader analytical purposes.

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**“Guidance in the sector does not provide clear qualitative data management options, nor does it set out how to use these tools or integrate them with other data management platforms within an organisation.”**

As a result, little of this qualitative data can be compared or synthesised with other data over time to indicate changes and trends. Central to this problem is a lack of strong qualitative data management. None of the organisations interviewed have centralised systems to handle data collected by qualitative monitoring approaches that could allow for easier synthesis of qualitative findings. This is even true for independent humanitarian monitoring organisations that specialise in research. Similarly, very few field M&E officers across the sector have access to analysis software currently. Organisations have instead prioritised the development of quantitative-focused information management and reporting systems (such as indicator-tracking systems) that provide limited scope for analysing data collected using mixed methods. Guidance in the sector does not provide clear qualitative data management options, nor does it set out how to use these tools or integrate them with other data management platforms within an organisation.

A large, light teal number '2' is centered on a darker teal background. The number is composed of a semi-circle at the top and a rectangular base at the bottom, with a central cutout in the upper part of the stem.

# Promising practice

## 2 Promising practice

This section presents some ideas to help organisations improve their qualitative approaches to monitoring humanitarian action. They should be considered as a menu of options to try depending on the varying context, capacities and monitoring needs of organisations, projects and teams.

### 2.1 Addressing capacity

#### Training and mentoring

Technical capacity is required throughout all components of qualitative approaches to monitoring. Trainings are a natural way to introduce and instruct staff on particular tools and methodologies, and they provide opportunities for individuals to practise their new skills. Many humanitarian organisations develop in-house trainings or rely on external providers specific to the sector. Although the former help to save costs and allow for tailored content, they are often delivered by M&E staff from global teams who themselves do not have any formal training in qualitative methods and seldom are qualified trainers. In turn, external providers typically cover broader M&E concepts and tools, without dedicating significant time to qualitative approaches.



#### **Tip: One-on-one tutoring**

One training expert explained that one-on-one tutoring during training is key to providing enough coaching and practice to learn new techniques (especially when it comes to analysis). Group exercises should be avoided.





### **Example: In-house training within a humanitarian organisation**

One organisation teaches how to analyse and code qualitative data by asking participants to organise a simple list of objects into different categories and to compare results. This demonstrates that coding is not an objective exercise. Participants are then given two example transcripts, which they must critically appraise before developing their own coding framework that they go on to discuss as a group. Training at this technical level requires participants to conduct the exercises individually so that they get the opportunity to practise (and therefore learn) new skills.

Given the time and skill required to conduct qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, it could be worth investing in a professionalised service specific to qualitative methods that may have higher technical impact – especially for M&E management staff, who could pass on this knowledge internally. Indeed, academic and accreditation courses in research methods already exist outside the sector. This would free up time for global teams to focus on strategic systems instead of delivering trainings.



### **Example: External training providers**

Private sector research companies sometimes send staff to particular accreditation courses if they do not already have a formal degree in research methodologies – examples include the Association for Qualitative Research (AQR) or the Social Research Association. These provide one-day moderation courses where individuals run an interview or focus group while being observed by a trainer.

Although trainings provide the opportunity to step back from daily tasks and take time to focus on specific instruction, they often have too many participants for effective teaching, are unable to meet the specific needs of individuals, and allow insufficient time for individual practice and feedback. Structured, robust mentoring and coaching of staff on an ongoing basis on the job is critical for building capacity and retaining staff (and their skills) over time. This approach would involve incrementally exposing staff to different aspects of the research process – starting with simple tasks and moving up to more complex ones – and mentoring them at key stages in this journey.



### **Example: In-house training within the private sector**

Notably, private sector companies invest heavily in mentoring and capacity-building over time. In one company, junior staff always start by just observing FGDs. Next they graduate to conducting telephone interviews before they progress to face-to-face interviews with less serious topics. Slowly they can start to address more serious topics and eventually they will move on to online facilitation. After roughly one year the facilitator can graduate to face-to-face interviews on substantive topics.

While humanitarian offices may not always have large enough teams to designate responsibilities perfectly to deliver timely data collection or provide mentoring to the same rigour as in other contexts, managers could take the time to assess and map the skills of their team. In turn, this can inform what is realistic to expect from research design. Additionally, managers are encouraged to keep a staff capacity-building plan, which can be useful when they come to delegate tasks in the qualitative data collection process to specific people. Such a plan can be updated after each activity, so that team members can graduate from lower-level tasks to those that require more skill after they have gained a minimum degree of experience. Feedback could be scheduled between each graduation.

### **“... training and mentoring are not mutually exclusive. ...”**

It is difficult to provide guidance and mentorship when managers do not always have time to accompany and observe data collection, or when teams are not large enough to delegate quality assessment of data to experienced ‘team leaders’. One way to tackle this challenge is for managers to listen back to audio recordings of interviews or discussions and to take note of facilitation skills. These activities can also be recorded via video with the consent of participants. Although such an activity may not always be appropriate in conflict or sensitive settings, participants may feel comfortable in certain contexts if it is clearly explained to them that the video is purely for staff training purposes. This technique is sometimes used by private sector research companies in order to review the quality of work.

Of course, training and mentoring are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they can be integrated to provide practice material for trainings and to increase the impact of trainings once staff return to their daily tasks.



### Example: In-house training within a UN agency

One UN agency is piloting their new training modules in such a way that participants first attend a training on design and implementation where they bring their current data collection tools along to modify them. Individuals then spend a couple of months in the field applying these new/modified tools and concepts with regular scheduled feedback sessions, after which they return to a second phase of training where they can discuss any challenges in more detail and also learn how to apply analytical techniques to the data they have collected. Remote technical support from a qualitative expert is provided to teams for up to three months following this second part of the training as participants analyse and disseminate their findings.



Photo credit: ECHO.

## Providing examples

Examples can set powerful benchmarks against which M&E staff can target their work. Although extensive M&E guidance exists in the humanitarian sector, and there are plenty of textbooks on qualitative methods in evaluative and academic realms, a common complaint by field staff is that they struggle to find examples of good practice in humanitarian settings that they can follow. Particular concepts that would benefit from examples include notes and transcripts, data management and coded analysis, and report or presentation templates for disseminating key findings from qualitative data. These good-practice materials can be difficult to identify or generate given the specificities of country cultural contexts and languages, and certainly do not replace the need for instruction on the processes behind each example. However, they can be critical for more visual learners.



### Example: In-house training through examples

One organisation is expanding a module to a three- or four-hour session where participants are provided with an example of a good transcript (with long narrative-type responses to good open-ended questions with probing) to compare against an example of a bad transcript (where yes/no answers have not been followed up, and the interviewer has made some assumptions in their line of questioning)

Examples can also be shared as part of guidance materials – such as the example of good-quality notes provided in the Catholic Relief Services' Practical guide: focus group discussions (Dzino-Silajdzic, 2018).

## Team structures

To address any capacity gaps within teams, managers could look to recruit people with professional research backgrounds and skill. Even if they do not have specific humanitarian experience, many have worked with social research, health or other areas of the public sector which could bring valuable skills to the field.

Where academic rigour is required, the creation of a global or regional research team that is separate from any monitoring team could concentrate the skills required for specific data collection exercises. This could minimise the report-writing requirements of the monitoring team (which can be particularly time-intensive), and instead allow them to focus on feeding findings into real-time decision-making. The research units could also provide in-house capacity-building sessions to monitoring teams, as M&E advisors themselves seldom have professional backgrounds in research methods.

It should be noted, however, that separating research from monitoring could redirect resources towards more expensive research activities and could lead to an undervaluing of what monitoring can bring to learning and adaptive management. In practice, a small research team may typically resort to more time- and resource-intensive methodologies that are familiar to them (such as randomised control trials) but are perhaps not always relevant in humanitarian settings. Separation of teams can also create a barrier to knowledge-sharing and communication – there is a risk that the two teams work in silo, and that research or monitoring data that could be valuable across both teams is not shared effectively or efficiently. In practice, small teams may not have time to share skills with monitoring teams across multiple country offices.

Another option could be to ‘mainstream’ recruitment of more specialised qualitative skills throughout monitoring teams, and instead invest in a ‘strategic’ learning team that works on improving the uptake of monitoring (including qualitative) data to inform future humanitarian programming.



#### **Example: Research units**

A handful of organisations in the sector have specific research units composed of a small number of research (including qualitative) specialists. These units do not sit within the M&E function. They typically operate at the global level, and lead on or provide surge support to specific research projects in country missions where it has been identified that more robust evidence is required.





Photo credit: Martin Karimi/ECHO.



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**‘Lighter’ and more creative forms of data collection can be very valuable and should not be discounted as evidence.**

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## 3.2 Addressing design

### ‘Good enough’ monitoring

‘Lighter’ and more creative forms of data collection can be very valuable and should not be discounted as evidence. M&E teams do not always need to design qualitative approaches to academic standards for the data to be useful for real-time decision-making in humanitarian settings or to contribute to an understanding of trends over time.

After taking into account the dynamic context and resource constraints in humanitarian settings, timely and regular information that is indicative of critical issues is the priority over quantity or ‘depth’ of information. Indeed, lighter monitoring can catch something that might warrant further attention (Hagens et al., 2012), saving time and allowing for more specific allocation of resources for monitoring efforts. While sophisticated methods may be more focused, effective and efficient, teams that aim too high regarding the scope or rigour of all of their monitoring data collection are likely only able to collect and analyse information every three to six months at best. By this time in a fragile context, it might be too late to either conduct further research to better understand the phenomena or to immediately address the issue in programming.

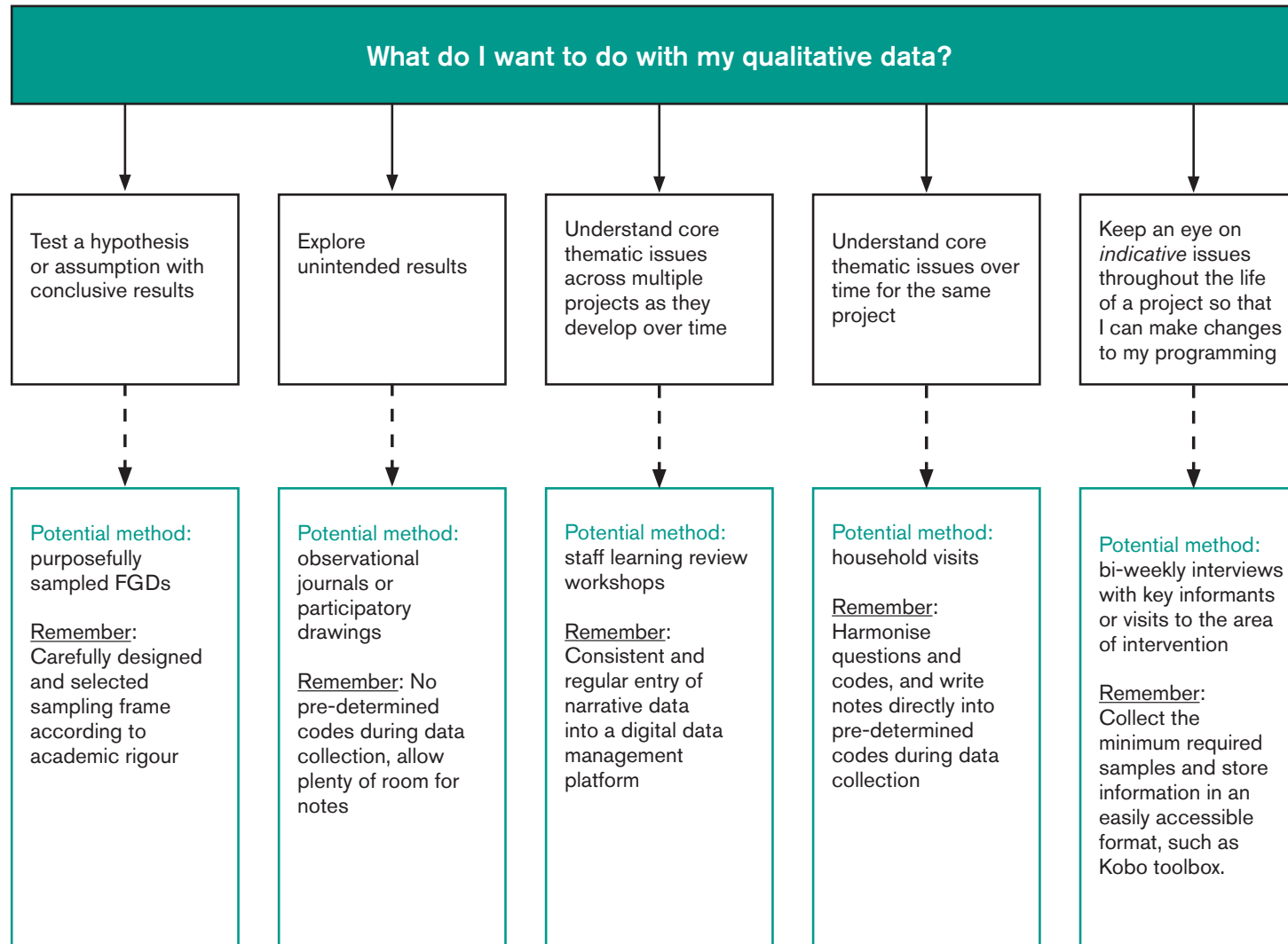


#### Example: Light monitoring

The Catholic Relief Service distinguishes between ‘light monitoring’ and more sophisticated methods, advocating for the former to provide systematic data without being burdensome (Hagens et al., 2012).

Figure 1 on the next page sets out potential methods and important considerations according to different objectives for collecting and using qualitative data.

Figure 1: Potential methodological approaches and issues to bear in mind for different types of monitoring or research



## Sampling

Smaller, purposive samples are often key to meeting the objectives of humanitarian monitoring, yet this is typically overlooked or misunderstood. M&E teams often collect far too many qualitative samples on the basis that their surveys will be more statistically representative and that their data can be disaggregated into different groups. They assume that a higher number of samples equates to more robust evidence. As expressed by one expert, ‘people get obsessed with random sampling’.



### Keep in mind: Over sampling

M&E teams will often conduct FGDs disaggregated by location as this is common practice for large statistical surveys. This produces a burdensome amount of information to analyse that does not necessarily add more value. A team in Syria conducted 56 FGDs for one study and was never able to analyse all of them.

In fact, random sampling is often ‘inappropriate’ in much humanitarian monitoring (ALNAP, 2016). Monitoring often requires lighter approaches, particularly in conflict areas where population numbers are changing or unknown and access is often constrained. Daniel’s guide on sampling suggests that non-random sampling can be suitable if qualitative methods are used and if the following criteria apply: there is a need for a quick decision, illustrative examples are required, easy operational procedures need to be used, and if time and money are limited (Daniel, 2013: ch.3). Purposive sampling can be valuable ‘because the members of the sample are deliberately chosen for the knowledge they can contribute to the research’ (ALNAP, 2016: 216). It should be noted that a small target sample size requires staff to be highly skilled.



### Definition: Data saturation

Data saturation occurs when new cases no longer add new knowledge (ALNAP, 2016). An example given by one expert is that if you want to find out what people call the first month of the year in a certain language, you do not need to interview many people.

‘Data saturation’ can be used to determine the sample size for purposive qualitative approaches, and represents the point at which new cases no longer add new knowledge (ALNAP, 2016). Critically, the assumption made by many practitioners that qualitative approaches are inherently unrepresentative is incorrect. In fact, they are representative of the group sampled. Rather, the risk is that an important group or category is not included. Therefore, the spread and variation of the sample can be more

important than the number. Although a sample cannot be pre-determined in this approach, data saturation is typically reached quite quickly with well-sampled participants. As many M&E teams typically collect more samples than they need, they can therefore afford to cut down their sample sizes without necessarily jeopardising the validity of their results. Samples can be even more targeted if applying 'lighter' monitoring. Where many programmes do not have sufficient staff to spare two people to conduct an FGD (it is recommended that one person takes notes one facilitates the discussion (Quinn-Patton, 2015), conducting less data collection could free up time to send two people and could ultimately improve the quality of the data collected.



#### **Tip: How many FGDs is too many?**

In particular, M&E teams struggle with figuring out how many FGDs to run. One qualitative expert explained that if your group is homogenous in its characteristics, then you may only need to collect one or two groups to capture all the different views for that characteristic. Typically, you are likely to have reached data saturation for one characteristic by six groups and you should not need to do more than 12.

Some sort of quantitative framework can be used to ensure that sampling selects the correct individuals and communities and that broad coverage is achieved without missing any key differences. This is important because, as one expert described, 'If you can clearly demonstrate who you are talking to ... this helps to create trust' (first name surname, personal communication, month year). Individual agencies often keep beneficiary lists with sex-, age- and gender-disaggregated data plus other demographic data such as occupation, education background and address. In cases where consent to contact them has been given, it is possible to reach out to beneficiaries for their consent to participate in future monitoring studies (alternatively, this could be done at registration stage), which enables organisations to recruit the right people to their samples to control for a mix of attitudes or characteristics instead of relying on ad hoc community mobilisation.



#### **Example: Large-scale sampling**

The private sector invests heavily in the sampling stage of their research. For example, one research company has a panel of four million people worldwide who have agreed to participate in studies, and it has pre-screened 850,000 people in the United Kingdom on 120,000 data points (such as income and political interests) to design its sampling frameworks.

## Methods

Monitoring of humanitarian action needs to discard the cookie-cutter approach to qualitative methods. Too often, M&E teams choose to implement the method that is most familiar to them, which tends to involve a series of discussions that are commonly misinterpreted as FGDs. In humanitarian practice, M&E teams frequently conflate FGDs and group discussions. While the former looks to understand the diversity of perspectives on a specific issue within a group of people of similar backgrounds and experiences (Quinn-Patton, 2015), during fieldwork teams may implement conversational interviews (group discussions) with a group of people that are not focused on a specific topic.

Qualitative appraisals involving techniques such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) – or Participatory Learning for Action (PLA) as they are sometimes known (Coghlan, 2014) – offer the opportunity to better meet the monitoring objectives of specific contexts in a more participatory fashion and using less time and resources than typical FGDs or surveys. Offering structured and tested ways to collect qualitative data (Chambers, 1992), PRA has been defined as a:

‘... family of participatory approaches and methods which emphasise local knowledge and enable local people to do their own appraisal, analysis and planning. PRA uses group animation and exercises to facilitate information sharing, analysis and action among stakeholders’ (World Bank, 1995: 175).

According to Brown et al. (2002: 1), the tools of PRA provide ‘accessibility and freedom from complex technical demands’. Some examples of PLA tools include resource mapping, social mapping, ranking, seasonal calendars and daily activity clocks.<sup>4</sup> Visual, interactive and creative methods have been found to be stronger tools to engage with conflict-affected and vulnerable people where more traditional methods may not be as appropriate – such as with children, survivors of sexual gender-based violence or the elderly (GSDRC, 2012).



### Example: Visual, interactive and creative methods for engagement

One organisation interviewed uses drawing and voting cards as a more accessible and fun way for children to express themselves, while another organisation uses de-personalised drama and theatre as a method to allow people to describe their perceptions without feeling singled out or experiencing shame.

4. For a brief introduction to PRA see <http://www.fao.org/3/X5996E/x5996e06.htm>



With PRA, it is important that people from the community are part of the research team (CRS, 2015). But users of these tools should be aware that the preference for visual over verbal techniques may simplify interpretations, and it is difficult to apply objective standards of quality control (Brown et al., 2002). These approaches can also be time-consuming, and the data generated can be more complex to analyse through coding compared to an interview or discussion transcript. However, if teams opt for verbal facilitated analysis, then this may not be as much of a hurdle (this analysis approach is discussed in more detail below). The analysts' exposure to the community throughout the approach and the involvement of the community in the analysis itself is likely to yield their deeper understanding that can, in fact, facilitate interpretation of the results (Coghlan, 2014).

PRA tools can be used not just to monitor projects, but also to help design the indicators that a team is monitoring. Standardisation can become less appropriate as organisations use higher-level perception-based indicators to describe outcomes, as perceptions are inherently context-specific. For example, with the indicator, '% of project participants with increased sense of belonging to the local community', PRA can help to define with the community what a sense of belonging means to them – and can thereby identify what needs to be measured (and how).



### Example: Community defined indicators

One organisation made community-defined indicators a mandatory policy, where staff were required to consult with beneficiaries in one or more communities to define indicators for project success within three months of the project start date. More recently, the organisation has decided to treat this as a 'good practice' rather than policy. While highly valuable in certain contexts, experience showed that not all projects benefit from having community-defined indicators nor can they all afford to have it.



Photo credit: Shakeb Nabi/Christian Aid.

Participatory video and photography methods can be effective additional tools for participatory visual data collection and dissemination of findings. The handover of ownership of messaging and the creative process behind video or photography can give a voice to conflict-affected and vulnerable people. Videos tell a powerful story, and they can address the commonly cited issue that it is difficult to make a qualitative output that is easy for decision-makers to absorb. While access to technology by conflict-affected and vulnerable people – and the time and skills associated with processing video footage in particular – represent significant barriers to using this approach more widely (Heath et al., 2010), some initiatives for application-based tools for use on smartphones or tablets are starting to address these challenges (Bartindale et al., 2019). Despite this progress, the relevance of imagery should not be overestimated as data in itself. Some of the most interesting information still comes from speaking with individuals to ask them how and why they chose to film or capture something in a certain way. These conversations, as well as notes of content analysis, end up being stored as textual data – which needs to be processed and interpreted also.

Anthropological approaches to research can play a role in qualitative monitoring, to help organisations understand the social fabric and cultural features of a specific context they are working in and therefore explain some of the results that organisations are seeing (Benoist et al., 1998; Shoham, 2017). In the context of humanitarian settings, these can most often involve observational methods (either participant observations if the data collector is a member of the community they are observing or non-participant observations) and ethnographic methods (combining observations over time with key informant interviews) (Mantel and Hanby, 2016). Anthropology played a critical role, for example, in informing the relevance and appropriateness of the Ebola response (Ebola Response Anthropology Platform). Although efforts to apply academic standards to these methods can outstrip the length and resources of a humanitarian project that may only last six months, the principles behind observational methods can inform ‘lighter’ approaches. For example, quality of programming can be quickly understood if M&E teams simply observe the delivery of assistance or services in a non-participatory manner. Similarly, teams can gain a lot from just walking around in a community without any questions at all – walking around a camp can quickly indicate whether water systems are working or not.



### Example: Anthropological approaches

A recent real-time evaluation (RTE) of communicating with communities as part of the Rohingya response in Myanmar demonstrated that very few Rohingya refugees were aware that a response 'Info Hub' information portal existed. The RTE recommended that an anthropological and qualitative study be carried out in order to understand – and therefore be able to address – why this was the case (Buchanan-Smith and Islam, 2018).



Photo credit: Peter Biro/ ECHO.



The difficulty with ethnographic approaches is that they are rarely systematic (Russell Bernard, 2017). The longer an observer is on the ground, the more they are able to understand what is happening, but this valuable knowledge is 'lost' or not transferred between people in time for decision-making if observations are not documented or recorded in a systematic way. One useful tool is an after-action review (AAR), whereby a structured meeting is held to discuss key learnings (USAID, 2006). At the same time, experts highlight that it is important to keep a flexible hypothesis in order to include unintended outcomes (Silverman, 2010). This could be achieved through teams keeping observational diaries or noting down their thoughts and impressions.



### **Example: Managing and retaining institutional knowledge**

One organisation in Myanmar has adopted a logbook approach that is kept by the project managers themselves, while another organisation in the Asia Pacific region uses debriefing processes to manage knowledge-transfer during high turnover rates with surge teams. One organisation conducts AARs as a substitute for evaluations of smaller or shorter projects.

In fact, much of this type of observational knowledge is already being accumulated by field staff but it is not necessarily utilised by organisations. For example, local knowledge and understandings of societal dynamics is strong among many field staff who are exposed to communities on a daily basis either through their delivery of assistance or by living in close proximity, sometimes even belonging to the community itself. There is a wealth of knowledge here that can be tapped into. Often, staff working in community mobilisation or similar positions will already know about key problems or successes with programming before M&E teams have conducted any more formal data collection, as staff will have heard this via the community grapevine. By speaking with staff first, light monitoring objectives can lessen the need for new data collection and avoid contributing to assessment fatigue.

**“ In fact, much of this type of observational knowledge is already being accumulated by field staff but it is not necessarily utilised by organisations.”**

Online platforms to host FGDs and interviews are another set of interesting technological tools – although they may be relevant for humanitarian agencies implementing remote programming in contexts with internet access, certainly they are not practical in all humanitarian settings. In the experience of particular private sector companies, this modality can help to attract certain individuals who are unable to participate in

person due to location or timing. Walston and Lissitz (2000) also found that participants who are completely anonymous tend to be more open to discussing sensitive or political topics. Although unable to observe body language, one informant emphasised that this is not a loss as in practice research reports seldom comment on behaviours of a group but rather use this information to adapt facilitation.

To an extent, certain facilitation aspects can be replicated online during ‘messaging’ modalities of data collection (only possible with literate individuals, of course), by observing who is typing or not typing, and being able to send a private message to an individual if they seem upset for example. Another benefit of online tools is that typed transcripts or audio recordings of online discussions are automatically generated. Still, given the importance of engagement with communities in humanitarian settings, the value of face-to-face discussions where individuals can interact with each other and the facilitator is able to build rapport and trust is hard to match.



### Example: Online engagement

Tools such as VisionsLive<sup>5</sup> allow teams to host discussions online where respondents type into a facilitated chat. Although this platform can be expensive, one private sector company explained that for them the benefits outweigh the cost – with experience they have found that this is the most effective and sensitive way to talk with participants about difficult topics, such as victims of sexual abuse or individuals coping with chronic illness.



Photo credit: Bertha Wengari, European Commission.

5. See <https://www.visionlive.com>.

## 2.3 Addressing the management and analysis of data

### Data management

Data management is critical if qualitative data is to be used again beyond the immediate data collection exercise – such as for coded analysis, accountability purposes, future evaluation or to compare with other data collected in another location or looking at trends over time. Digital options can be effective to this end, however it is important to highlight that there are legal and ethical implications of digital data management. When looking to digitise qualitative data it is important to plan carefully for adherence to legal requirements relating to data protection and confidentiality, and to minimise the risk of hacking or data theft (Christoplos et al., 2018). It is also critical to remember to obtain informed consent from all study participants.



#### Example: Managing and sharing data

Interviewees from one case study reported that any urgent cases or findings from FGDs were often shared with decision-makers via email or phone on a needs-basis with a phrase or sentence logged in a complaints database. However, the larger body of notes were stowed away in a drawer without being used again, meaning that the bulk of data was not shared with others or used in a systematic way.

As discussed by Kuner and Marelli (2017: 14), '[i]n recent years, the development of new technologies allowing for easier and faster processing of ever-increasing quantities of personal data in an interconnected world has given rise to concerns about the possible intrusion into the private sphere of individuals'. Practitioners should consult the Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action by the ICRC (ibid.).



#### Example: Transferring and processing data

A case study in Uganda found that field-based M&E staff in the base location were spending up to two days a week transferring activity attendance data from hard copy sheets into an excel database. Similarly, in Lebanon, it took four days to process checklist results from classroom observations. Both of these processes could have been collected using technology such as Kobo, removing the need for a second stage of data entry and saving a significant amount of time.



### Example: Combining tools

One organisation in Bangladesh has linked up Kobo collection tools with a larger CommCare database that handles beneficiary and case information. This allows qualitative data from different collection points to be viewed at the same time, and also enables cumulative information about one case to be stored in the same place.

Currently, data entry into data management systems can be a significant drain on time and resources when applying qualitative approaches to monitoring. Much of this stems from the fact that much qualitative data is collected as handwritten notes, which is time-consuming to digitise verbatim or to type up in summary style to share with others. Digital data entry tools are often utilised for survey data collection (and, de facto, in most cases quantitative surveys). With practice, however, note-taking staff could become more comfortable typing notes directly into data entry platforms that can be accessed by multiple users. This might be especially effective in FGDs or observation scenarios, where the note-taker does not need to facilitate and interact with the interviewee(s) and so the use of a computer/tablet/phone does not interrupt this rapport. For example, Kobo toolbox and other servers that use Open Data Kit for mobile data collection allow for text entry fields. In a simpler fashion, data can be entered directly into Microsoft Word, Excel or other customised data management platforms via laptops. Alternatively, there may be other areas of work that are draining time for data entry that can be made more efficient, which would free up more space for processing handwritten notes.

**“A common excuse for not processing qualitative information is that it takes too much time to transcribe, translate and/or code textual narratives [but] they may not be altogether necessary for monitoring purposes.”**

#### Oral analysis

A common excuse for not processing qualitative information is that it takes too much time to transcribe, translate and/or code textual narratives. In busy humanitarian settings one cannot expect to have the time or capacity to complete such tasks – and in fact they may not be altogether necessary for monitoring purposes (Cornish and Skovdal, 2015). For example, one case study organisation spent six months recruiting people and waiting for transcription and translation of 12 focus groups.



Oral or interactive modalities can be a good alternative to transcripts if teams are pressed for time and resources. Instilling ‘debriefings’ or ‘analysis meetings’ as standard parts of the monitoring process could significantly cut down the time needed for data management and analysis. By way of comparison, according to one expert, it can take several weeks to transcribe, translate and code six FGDs, while an oral analysis exercise can take just two hours. This could be relevant for individuals and teams seeking to inform operational decision-making as quickly as possible, who do not need to produce findings that require a count of frequencies in the data or quantitative analysis of the original data (for example, for use in peer-reviewed publications). Although this oral approach to analysis is ‘lighter’, it can be insightful if it is facilitated well. Oral approaches can also include verbally translating and explaining narratives if interviews are to be held in a local language that the analyst does not understand. The interactive analysis process can also help to avoid risks of ‘lazy coding’ during textual analysis that simply extracts quotes or lines in response to the questions being asked. In most monitoring cases, oral analysis should be enough to obtain reliable, actionable information.



#### **Example: Relying on notes rather than transcriptions**

One leading private sector company typically has to provide their clients with findings and recommendations within a two-week period and sometimes within just a couple of days. They do not transcribe recordings from interviews – rather, the facilitator and analyst meet at the end of data collection and review the notes together, during which they pull out and write down key messages and themes in an analytical table.



#### **Example: Transcribing in parts**

One evaluator saves time by transcribing one or two interviews first, which can give an idea of the important thematic sections to transcribe in subsequent interviews. As such, it is not always necessary to transcribe an entire interview – specific quotes can be transcribed selectively instead.

“

**In most monitoring cases, oral analysis should be enough to obtain reliable, actionable information.**

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Photo credit: Direct Relief.

### Consistency in coding analysis

During data collection, notes can be taken directly into a template of codes (a table with each column dedicated to a theme or code) to avoid spending considerable time manually re-organising notes to apply ‘coding’ analysis methods. This approach is relevant for a specific line of enquiry or to apply consistent themes across data collection so as to be able to compare results. However, creating categories from the outset carries the inherent risk of restricting the data being collected – especially when keeping an open mind to unintended results (one of the values of using qualitative methods) (Silverman, 2010). Further, any pre-set codes could encourage staff to only look for these specific themes in a check-box manner rather than taking a more holistic view to data collection. Pre-set codes might therefore be more appropriate for routine monitoring exercises than exploratory efforts, otherwise care needs to be taken to use broad codes that do not restrict the information collected.



#### Example: Coding as you go

Several evaluators and experts described how their note-takers type straight into a digital spreadsheet during data collection. Should new, unexpected codes arise, they add new columns (codes) in the table as they go along. Spreadsheets allow them to quickly count frequencies by filtering certain column results and the information can be quickly compiled and compared if the same spreadsheet is used by different people or at different times. When using an online data collection tool, the audience can view the findings directly by the thematic area they are interested in without needing to wait for a report. If the note-taker is not comfortable typing, they can write notes into a hard-copy printed table.

If the same codes are used consistently across data collection exercises (for example, in different locations or at a later date), data can start to be compared or synthesised. Organisations can then use the data to look across implementation locations or to explore trends over time to provide a more holistic understanding of developments and results. Moreover, standardised or centralised data management systems can encourage greater consistency behind coding or categorisation. Although it is important to be wary of tool fatigue and the limits of standardisation (especially at the global level), systematisation and consistency – at least at the country level – is important to ensure that data is used for decision-making.

Other opportunities to control consistency in data collection can be provided by the guide or tool used. For example, specific questions in guides can be marked with an asterisk to indicate that they must be asked in the exact way to all participants. Clear instructions or reminders for facilitation can be inserted at different points within a script (for example, noting ‘Have you remembered to encourage quieter participants to respond?’). Humanitarian guidance typically provides instructions and templates separately from the tools themselves and, with many different documents to handle and refer to, important components can easily be overlooked in practice.



#### **Example: Scripted guides**

One research institute uses scripted guides as handouts for data collectors in country teams, scripting not only the introduction but also specific phrases to use to probe respondents following survey questions.

#### **Using software for analysis**

Software is often considered a solution to the challenges with analysis of qualitative data, but it cannot produce codes or assign codes to phrases on its own – the M&E Officer still needs to do this. As expressed by one interviewee; ‘The problem with qualitative software is when software becomes a substitute for analysis ... Software is only as good as the approach and set of concepts you’re using’. Most evaluation experts and qualitative academics interviewed for this research explained that they seldom use software and prefer to use manual methods – it is felt by some that software can be counterproductive for efficiency when individuals ‘get bogged down in coding’.

**“The problem with qualitative software is when software becomes a substitute for analysis ... Software is only as good as the approach and set of concepts you’re using”.**

6. See <https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/home>

Currently, very few field M&E officers have access to analysis software, given the associated costs and the limited capacity to understand the principles of coding. Of the senior M&E staff that do use software, the package most often cited was Nvivo<sup>6</sup> (largely because it is the software most people have heard of, rather than it being based on a cost-benefit analysis compared to other software options). The drawback with many analytical software platforms is not only that humanitarians are often reluctant to pay for software solutions, but that they are not tailored to humanitarian needs (missing certain beneficial functions) and they are often too big to utilise (with an overwhelming choice of analytical functions that are not necessary for humanitarian monitoring and can be confusing for the user). Moreover, the user either has to manually create new codes during each analysis phase or must upload a set of codes that someone else has used – neither of which is straightforward.



### Example: In-house software

To help speed up the coding process, a number of organisations are experimenting with developing in-house software programming (such as by using Python code, a programming language) to help automatically read, organise and count certain thematic data. However, none of the organisations interviewed for this study had finalised any of these systems.

Despite this cautionary tale, software can be helpful to store, organise and manage large amounts of data to allow for critical reflection (WFP, 2019). Although software is unlikely to be useful for a standalone monitoring exercise given the small amount of data collected, as a country office accumulates qualitative data over time software can help to archive and maximise use of this data beyond ad hoc data collection moments. The principle benefit of using a common platform for analysis is that consistent codes can be applied to data across projects and programmes – allowing for review and comparison of information at a more holistic level over time. Commonly used software platforms in the qualitative industry (such as Nvivo, ATLAS.ti<sup>7</sup> and MAXQDA<sup>8</sup>) also have a ‘cloud’ function where codes and files can be shared easily online. Bearing in mind that qualitative information is already being collected by many humanitarian programmes, the data might as well be organised more systematically so that it may reveal important insights, otherwise textual narratives tend to be used once (if at all) for a specific monitoring or research objective and not used again. For those organisations wishing to invest in software, one expert recommended that staff using the platform should first learn the principles of manual coding; if they jump straight into using software then analysis is often of poor quality.

7. See <https://atlasti.com/>

8. See <https://www.maxqda.com/>





## Example: A collaborative solution to improve humanitarian analysis software

The DEEP platform<sup>9</sup> – a collaboration between Okular Analytics with Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS), the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the Joint Internally Displaced Persons Profiling Service (JIPS), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) and the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) – is looking to address the limitations of analysis software developed outside the sector. Originally developed for processing online and offline secondary data sources, this platform is more user-friendly and over time the software is learning to apply tags that are relevant for humanitarian actors. The platform is also designed to be a collaborative, common repository and includes a geographical mapping function.



Caption: OCHA / Salih Zeki Fazlıoğlu

9. See <https://deephelp.zendesk.com/hc/en-us>.

## 2.4 Addressing utilisation

### Death to reports?

It is important to consider investing in methods of dissemination that do not rely on people reading a report. M&E practitioners and decision-makers expressed a resounding view that the most effective method of disseminating qualitative findings for operational decision-making is through in-person communication, during general staff meetings or specific presentations. In some cases, monitoring teams are starting to borrow certain evaluative tools, such as participatory feedback workshops, to implement data collection and dissemination methods at the same time.



#### Example: A meetings approach

One organisation in Bangladesh described that one weekly field-level meeting and bi-weekly senior-level meetings allow different types of information to be shared with specific user groups – ensuring data is relevant for the audience.

When planning to share results, organisations should critically consider if a full report is truly necessary – either if it has been requested for internal use by a donor or if it is to be published externally. If the purpose of reporting is to share findings internally or to document results, then presentations from workshops or emails with actionable recommendations can always be archived instead. Organisations can use standard presentation templates and formats in meetings to set minimum standards and to help country offices to avoid reinventing the wheel. It can also be helpful for country teams to have a draft agenda to structure discussions in an effective and actionable way. Such guiding agendas are frequently used already to standardise content for preliminary and review meetings and could be used similarly for reporting purposes.



#### Example: Internal communication

M&E teams in one organisation described how if they notice an issue they immediately pass on information via email or verbally to the project management for follow-up and action. As they sit in the same office and spend time together, much is discussed conversationally as well. In turn, senior management in the same country office described how they often make phone calls to members of staff that they trust will know the information that they need.



Although workshops and meetings can be inclusive and effective, they still require a certain degree of preparation and are not always timely for more urgent decision-making. Despite the delays associated with more formal dissemination, it seems that the significant amount of informal knowledge-sharing that already informs programmatic decisions can be harnessed better. Senior management expressed that they never make decisions based on a specific report that they have read, nor do they wait for a report to be finished in order to make a decision. Rather, they accumulate knowledge over time – either through observations and conversations or through less formal communication of monitoring findings such as emails. These processes are considered so effective because of their flexible, rapid and ‘informal’ nature. However, they are likely reflective of the culture of the organisation or office and so may not be effective in all organisations without more structured processes and techniques.



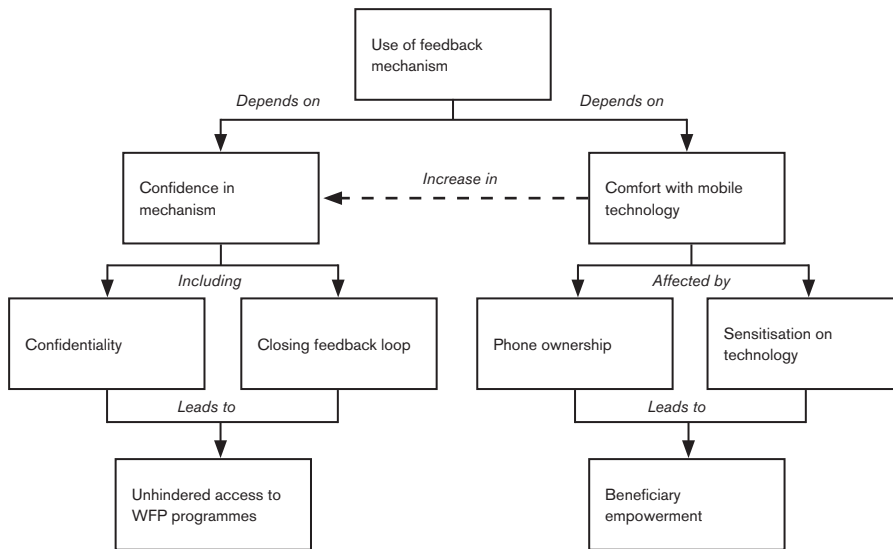
#### **Example: Less is more**

If a report is required, one evaluation expert has found that sticking to ten recommendations (even if there are 27) is the most effective, as no managerial team is capable of keeping track of more. Each finding should be coupled with an enabling action. They avoid just using the qualitative data to provide quotes to accompany quantitative analysis. Instead, they invest in sharp sub-headings, they start each point with one clear and bold statement, and then back this up with a couple of sentences with supporting evidence. This way, readers can flick through the report and grasp key messages quickly. They stressed that senior managers would not read more than one or two pages: ‘if you’re very lucky they will read an executive summary’.

In terms of non-verbal ways to disseminate qualitative findings, visual treatment of textual data can help to reduce data into a clear, digestible and meaningful format and can be an effective communication tool to avoid a long narrative report. Open source word cloud products can count how often certain phrases or words are used in transcripts. These programmes will automatically pull out the most common terms, can analyse whether these words are positive or negative, and can visually demonstrate the frequency of use (whereby the size of the word represents how often it is used). Such software can be used to present findings in a compelling way to decision-makers during a presentation and can also be a useful and quick analysis tool to test assumptions. To use these tools in an evidential way, it is critical that the question being analysed has been asked in exactly the same way to everyone – otherwise the words used in the responses are not

comparable. Tableau can also be used to create similar interactive bubble charts, whereby you can click on parts of the chart to filter by different characteristics. However, this software is slightly more difficult to learn. Another tool is a 'concept map' – 'A concept map is a schematic device for representing a set of concepts and visualizing connections and patterns between these concepts. It is designed so that broader more inclusive concepts appear at the top of a hierarchy, with words linking high concepts to lower concepts, demonstrating interconnections and meaning in the data' (WFP, 2019: 40). An example is provided in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2: Example of a concept map**



Source: Reproduced from WFP (2019: 40)

A large, light teal number '5' is centered in the background of the slide. The number is composed of a top curve, a vertical stem, and a bottom curve, all rendered in a semi-transparent teal color that allows the darker teal background to show through.

# Conclusion

## 3 Conclusion

Despite the persistent lack of prioritisation of qualitative data compared to quantitative reporting for monitoring in the humanitarian sector, there is gradual recognition that qualitative approaches are also necessary to explain results and to identify what needs to change to improve programming (Bond, 2014). Agencies are struggling to figure out how to implement and use these qualitative approaches efficiently (Hofmann et al., 2004; Prowse, 2007; Guerrero et al., 2013; Bond, 2014; Knox-Clarke and Darcy, 2014; Brown and Johnson, 2015; Jansbury et al., 2015; Development Initiatives, 2016; Stern and de Roquemaurel, 2017; Venables, 2017; Warner, 2017; ALNAP, 2018).

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**“If humanitarian practitioners are asking vulnerable populations to share their time and often private experiences, they have a responsibility to use the information they are providing”**

It is perhaps ironic that while humanitarian agencies express that they are not using enough qualitative approaches for monitoring, this study has found that they are in fact already often reporting qualitative indicators and are sitting on a lot of qualitative data that has potential value (Development Initiatives, 2016; Field et. al. 2016). Across the board, organisations are collecting much more qualitative information than they are using. If humanitarian practitioners are asking vulnerable populations to share their time and often private experiences, they have a responsibility to use the information they are providing – otherwise there is no justification for collecting it (Camp et al., 2018). As the tools and systems used are currently often not fit for purpose, organisations need to be more creative in how they collect this data, as well as more systematic in how they harness and use this information.

There is limited understanding about what qualitative data can be used and how for different purposes, which naturally affects the extent to which it is prioritised within humanitarian monitoring in comparison to quantitative approaches and systems (Cornish and Skovdal, 2015). Too often, the distinction between qualitative data (i.e. the type of information being collected) and qualitative approaches (i.e. the way the data is treated or analysed) is not understood by humanitarian practitioners. This has three major impacts. First, many organisations fail to appreciate the

potential value of the qualitative data that they already collect through informal means, because it does not fit their perception of what 'good evidence' looks like. Second, data collection and management tools have become siloed between numbers and text. The association of databases with numbers and a fear that working with text inherently becomes complex has contributed to a trend whereby agencies have developed quantitatively focused information management systems that provide limited scope for analysis using mixed methods. This restricts the ways in which qualitative data can be archived and used over time and across locations – and limits the potential to inform decision-making beyond immediate data collection. Third, agencies falsely assume that they are reporting almost wholly quantitative results. This feeds back into the perception that qualitative information is less critical in resource-stretched emergency settings, which in turn means that qualitative skills are under-prioritised in recruitment.

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**“If monitoring can be approached with more creativity, consistency and structure through some relatively simple measures, much of the data that is lost today could be harnessed so that the sector has more knowledge of why things happen in order to inform better humanitarian programming.”**

Of course, there is no silver bullet. If humanitarian organisations want to take qualitative approaches more seriously then they need to start investing in the skills, time and resources needed to ensure that rigorous methods are followed. There also remains a time and place for qualitative research methods that are implemented to academic standards (Knox-Clarke and Darcy, 2014). Different humanitarian agencies have widely varying capacities across their country offices (Warner, 2017), which affects the application of qualitative approaches to monitoring. Each organisation or team will require different solutions dependent on their needs and abilities.

That said, qualitative analysis does not need to be as laborious as is often assumed, and more informal data- and knowledge-sharing will be better suited to particular decision-making needs. As monitoring has the objective of informing programmes on a continuous and timely basis and to contribute to learning over time (Warner, 2017), one of the main themes running through this paper is that there are ways to make qualitative data 'good enough' for different monitoring purposes (Cornish and Skovdal, 2015). Although there has been a push by donors and agencies for more evidence-based programming and methodological approaches to monitoring data (Darcy et al., 2013), depending on who is using the information, the sophistication of method does not always need to meet academic standards (Cornish and Skovdal, 2015). If monitoring can be approached with more creativity, consistency and structure through some relatively simple measures (Bamberger, 2015), much of the data that is lost today could be harnessed so that the sector has more (shared) knowledge of why things happen in order to inform better humanitarian programming.

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## Related ALNAP publications

- Back to the drawing board: How to improve monitoring of outcomes
- Breaking the Mould: Alternative approaches to monitoring and evaluation
- Evaluation of Protection Guide
- What is Monitoring in Humanitarian Action?
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