Remote Monitoring
Learning from practice during the Covid-19 pandemic

September 2021

Authors:

Pauline Tatua, Alix Tiernan

Christian Aid exists to create a world where everyone can live a full life, free from poverty. We are a global movement of people, churches and local organisations who passionately champion dignity, equality and justice worldwide. We are the change makers, the peacemakers, the mighty of heart.

caid.org.uk

Contact us

Christian Aid
35 Lower Marsh
Waterloo
London
SE1 7RL
T: +44 (0) 20 7620 4444
E: info@christian-aid.org
W: caid.org.uk

Christian Aid is a member of

actalliance

Contents

List of acronyms

MEL   Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

MEAL   Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning

M&E   Monitoring & Evaluation

iPIMS   International Programme
             Information Management Systems

DRC   Democratic Republic of Congo

IoPt   Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory

KII   Key Informant Interview

PDM   Post Distribution Monitoring

FGD   Focus Group Discussions

PPE   Personal Protective Equipment

FCDO   Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office

NGO   Non-Governmental Organization

RM   Remote Monitoring

Executive summary

When COVID-19 spread during 2020, it presented a global public health concern which resulted in official (government enforced) and personal (self-protective behaviour) restriction of movement in order to limit the physical contact that was recognised to be the main driver of the pandemic. This affected all sectors of society, including the development sector. Monitoring and evaluation activities of humanitarian and development projects faced challenges as project staff were not able to visit stakeholders or travel into affected communities or to implementation sites. However, it soon became clear that the pandemic offered an unprecedented opportunity for many organisations to develop solutions for collecting data for accountability and learning, which avoids the need for physical contact between people. This study explored Christian Aid's adaptation to COVID-19, particularly staff experiences of remote monitoring in our programmes, to learn how remote monitoring had worked (and hadn't), and to capture learning around how to improve remote monitoring practices going forward.

Data collection exercises for this review took place between February and April 2021. Survey questionnaires were completed by 21 staff from 14 countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Colombia, DRC, El Salvador, Haiti, Kenya, Nigeria, IoPt, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Syria and Zimbabwe. Key informant interviews were held with eight additional staff members, including both staff from Christian Aid headquarters and different country programmes.

In Christian Aid's Remote Monitoring Guidance, three situations where remote monitoring may be needed are identified:

- Level 1: Christian Aid staff cannot reach the project sites but implementing partner staff can.
- Level 2: Christian Aid and partner staff cannot travel to the project sites, but community leaders/gate keepers and locally-based staff can travel in the area.
- Level 3: Movement is extremely restricted by health and safety risks, but people in the project sites can continue some level of information collection.

The review's findings confirm that at each of these levels, remote monitoring provides a viable alternative to collect data on project/programme performance, and that the increase in programme risk as a result is acceptable in the short term. Most respondents noted that the switch to remote monitoring did not prevent or significantly hinder project implementation. They noted that remote monitoring allowed for flexibility in data collection both in terms of the amount of data to be collected and the mode of data collection. Remote monitoring reduced risk to Christian Aid, partner staff and community members while facilitating accountability in complex and rapidly changing environments, with partners benefiting from playing a greater role in the data collection and analysis process. It enabled quick decision making as information (especially via social media and phone) could be received in real time and analysed, especially when projects utilised KoBo Collect. Remote monitoring also saved on resources (money and time) as travel was reduced.

As much as remote monitoring may allow for savings, it is not recommended as a full substitute for 'normal' monitoring, unless it is the only option in a particular context. Disadvantages included the loss of detail in terms of qualitative data and in terms of data disaggregation, for example, due to lack of training or capacity by community data collectors; a heightened risk around misuse of funds, fraud and safeguarding incidents; and some loss of oversight of project progress. Nonetheless, respondents recognised that remote monitoring may offer an opportunity to move towards a more consistently applied hybrid approach, while acknowledging the increased risk it carries.

Respondents tended to favour a blended monitoring model, which benefits from a more systematic balancing of monitoring by Christian Aid staff and partners, and which also supports the localisation approach. By cultivating strong and equitable partnerships Christian Aid can use remote monitoring as an opportunity to strengthen our commitment to partner ownership of data as well as to partner decision-making on projects.

If Christian Aid uses remote monitoring more widely as part of standard programme management, the following risk-mitigating measures should be considered:

1. Support staff in the transition from 'business as usual' to remote monitoring practice, and back again, with emphasis on ensuring risk is assessed and managers, partners and donors are aware of and agree to the change.

2. Provide resources for the shift, i.e., for capacity assessment, staff and partner training, appropriate IT hardware and software for partner staff, data collectors and community-based monitors.

3. Balance the two risks of staff safety and income stability, as donors may continue to have an expectation of field presence to ensure accountability and may reduce funding given the shift to remote monitoring.

4. Ensure remote monitoring tools can still collect information about how the project has included people who might have been left behind – how this is done should be spelled out in a revised MEL plan.

5. As remote monitoring may reduce our capacity to identify financial and safeguarding issues around programme management, more vigilance around these important risks will need to be built into the methodology and communications with partners during remote monitoring.

6. As remote monitoring does require a higher level of M&E capacity at partner and community level, Christian Aid's commitment to support partner M&E practice is critical, both through accompaniment and ensuring adequate budget for M&E is in place.

7. Whenever possible, a minimum of one visit by Christian Aid staff to field locations per year should still be planned for.

8. Internal systems need to enable data collection and data management by partners and ensure that routine project management quality controls take remote monitoring into account as an alternate means of data collection and project compliance.

1   Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic spread during 2020 it presented a huge public health concern, which forced governments and organisations all over the world to act in a manner that would safeguard the health of their employees. As deaths from the virus increased, different governments put restrictive measures in place to curb the spread. This included total and partial restriction of movement, social distancing measures, restriction of public gatherings and use of PPE among others. In a very short time COVID-19 was not only claiming lives but changing the normal ways of working. High-level meetings were now convened through multiple IT applications; knowledge and skills trainings were conducted through e-learning platforms and webinars among others; and when meeting in person, numbers were severely reduced and strict social distancing measures adhered to.

Project monitoring and evaluation activities of humanitarian and development projects were not spared either. Challenges in conducting normal monitoring resulted in the development of innovative ways to monitor projects remotely. For a long time, in-person data collection methods have been the primary modality for collecting data for different purposes. COVID-19 offered an unparalleled opportunity for many organisations to come up with solutions for collecting data for accountability and learning that avoided the need for physical contact between people.

This study explored Christian Aid's staff experiences of remote monitoring across countries where Christian Aid was working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.1   Purpose of the study

The purpose of the review was:

- To explore remote monitoring experiences of staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, across all Christian Aid country programmes, to learn what has worked (and what hasn't).
- To capture best practice around how to improve remote monitoring practices going forward.

1.2   Objectives of the study

The study was divided into 4 objectives:

- To map out how remote monitoring was used in Christian Aid programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the extent to which this approach differed from the normally taken monitoring approaches.
- To assess to what extent remote monitoring influenced the delivery and/or quality of programming (positive or negative), and to assess the corporate risks associated with remote monitoring (safeguarding, misuse of funds, fraud, and responsible data management).
- To assess how remote monitoring affected our partnership way of working, and our commitment to localisation.
- To recommend any changes or improvements to Christian Aid's Remote Monitoring Policy and Guidelines, and to the new programme management system currently being developed (iPIMS), to inform future programming practice.

It was hoped that the findings would provide important learning for use both internally (by Christian Aid staff) and externally (by other stakeholders in the humanitarian and development space).

2   Literature Review

According to Sida and Oakley (2019), remote monitoring describes the monitoring of a) context evolution, b) implementation of programmes and its effects, and c) performance and compliance of partner organisations, in areas where physical access to project sites, affected populations and/or partner organisations is restricted or not possible[1].

Christian Aid defines remote monitoring as, 'A form of monitoring that collects information about a project or programme when you cannot reach the project sites directly. Sometimes projects are delivered in locations which are inaccessible due to poor or deteriorating security situations, risk to health and safety e.g., as a result of a pandemic or epidemic, logistical challenges, the threat of, or consequences of, severe weather or natural disaster, or limited resources, which make regular access to very remote locations difficult'[2].

Remote monitoring is not new in the humanitarian and development communities – it has been used by humanitarian and development actors to ensure delivery of aid and promote development in high-risk contexts affected by conflicts and fragility, and during outbreak of diseases such as in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, Somalia, Sierra Leone and DRC among others.

According to Steets et al. (2012), 'the quality of assessments cannot always be guaranteed in remote operations and switching into remote mode can reduce the complexity and quality of projects'[3]. Chaudri et al. (2017) noted that accountability in remote operations is compromised by limited opportunities for data collection, poor quality data and inaccurate information, lack of monitoring skills and capacity of local staff, lack of good baseline data for performance indicators, issues with safely sharing information, rapid aid influxes that necessitate immediate action and prevent M&E from being built in at the onset, and difficulty gaining support from local staff who may feel money is better spent on delivery of aid[4].

In many cases, remote monitoring is an adaptation of methodologies used for standard monitoring practices. Handheld devices for digital data collection, mobile phone-based feedback mechanisms, remote sensing with satellites or delivery tracking, and broadcasting with radios and other forms of media have been identified as key technological applications for remote monitoring (Dette and Steets, 2016)[5]. Despite the range of monitoring mechanisms, organisations are operating at a disadvantage due to their distance from implementation and many issues can go either unreported or unnoticed. Donini (2011) points out that this is particularly the case for human rights and gender-based violence issues[6].

The risks and potential costs of making a bad decision due to poor or inadequate information from remote monitoring are potentially significant – such as the risk of diversion, corruption, poor targeting, or a host of other problems[7]. Steets et al. argue that as far as donor accountability is concerned, staff monitoring projects remotely cannot verify their claims. In addition, the lack of direct oversight and control can adversely impact the quality of projects delivered and this may damage the reputation of humanitarian organisations and their donors[8]. A growing challenge for the aid organisations using these new technologies is to convince people that reporting problems is beneficial and will not place them in danger of losing support or funding if they document concerns[9].

One of the key aspects of remote monitoring is the greater reliance on local actors, such as partner organisations. Donini and Maxwell (2014) note that partnership does best with upkeep and interaction[8]. They suggest that access restrictions – and the resulting inability to provide training and direct technical oversight, and to carry out the direct interactions that are important for passing on technical advice, brainstorming ideas, sharing information and so on – compromise programme quality.

However, researchers and donor agencies agree that in challenging operating environments, such as in the context of COVID-19, there is a need to ensure that in spite of access restrictions, strong monitoring systems are in place to ensure high-quality and timely data. The United Nations International Organization for Immigration (UN IOM), notes that good practice in undertaking remote monitoring includes: developing an adapted monitoring and evaluation plan (especially for larger or more complex projects), setting up monitoring tools and ensuring staff capacity to use them, reviewing of monitoring progress in regular staff meetings (using virtual meeting and chat tools), enabling real-time communication and information-sharing mechanisms, and documenting and sharing monitoring results to inform project management as well as feed into any eventual evaluation or learning exercises[10]. Donini and Maxwell (2014) highlight that remote monitoring data can be significantly improved through triangulation of information reported by partners with different sources at the community level, such as community elders, social committees, key informants, and visual documentation.

3   Methodology

The study adopted mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) and was based on a desk review, surveys, and several key informant interviews. The KIIs were identified after analysis of survey findings to fill information gaps. Both surveys and interviews were carried out remotely.

Data collection exercises for this review took place between February and April 2021. The survey questionnaires were completed by 21 staff holding different positions as shown in Table 3.1. They were from 14 countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Colombia, DRC, El Salvador, Haiti, Kenya, Nigeria, IoPt, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Syria, and Zimbabwe.

Table 1: Survey respondents

Position	Number
MEL Officer	7
Project Officer	4
MEL Assistant	2
MEL Advisor	1
Project Manager/Coordinator	6
Other	1
Total	21

Key informant interviews were held with eight staff, including staff from both Christian Aid headquarters and different country programmes. They included a programme funding manager, financial crime compliance manager, safeguarding advisor, MEAL officers and advisors, as well as various senior programme staff.

As this review was undertaken when COVID-19 was still severely impacting programming and significantly stretching Christian Aid staff and partners, a decision was made not to ask partner staff to input into this review, to avoid an additional burden. It is planned to complement this review with a few case studies that will look specifically at how partners perceived the move to remote monitoring over the course of the year.

4   Findings

Between April and December 2020, in the context of COVID-19, guidance from organisational and programme management included the recommendation to try to use remote monitoring to assess the performance of projects where access to project sites was difficult. A Remote Monitoring Policy and Remote Monitoring Guidance were drafted in April 2020 and made available via the COVID-19 SharePoint page, to support practice in this area.

The review collected and analysed programme staff experiences in applying remote monitoring in 2020, as an adaptation and mitigation measure to the pandemic. This section presents findings of Christian Aid staff experiences in remote monitoring as per the objectives of the learning review.

4.1   How remote monitoring was implemented in programming in 2020

Objective 1: To map out how remote monitoring was used in Christian Aid programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the extent to which this approach differed from the monitoring approaches normally used.

Christian Aid's minimum requirement for project monitoring is that Christian Aid staff visit partner work at least twice a year, with at least one of these visits to include site visits. With the occurrence of COVID-19 and subsequent restrictions of movement, some staff in different countries could not conduct these first-hand visits. Staff were asked about how they applied remote monitoring to the projects they were working on.

4.1.1   When was remote monitoring used?

The Remote Monitoring Guidelines set out three situations in which remote monitoring may be required:

- Level 1: Christian Aid staff cannot reach the project sites but implementing partner staff can.
- Level 2: Christian Aid and partner staff cannot travel to the project sites, but community leaders/gate keepers and locally based staff can travel in the area.
- Level 3: Movement is extremely restricted by health and safety risks, but people in the project sites can continue some level of information collection.

The survey showed that some level of remote monitoring was applied in all the 65 projects listed by respondents during the study timeframe (April–December 2020), see also Figure 1 below. The majority of projects (61%) were at Level 1 for some time, i.e., project sites could still be reached by partner staff at least at some stage during the study timeframe. About a quarter of projects (26%) were at Level 3 for some time, i.e., no data collection beyond individual data responses was possible for at least some time (see picture below). Respondents indicated that the level of remote monitoring required varied over the course of the year, depending on the health situation in the country, and the movement restrictions imposed by governments, so that one project could move from Level 1 to Levels 2 or 3 within a short time period. One respondent noted that as they were recognised by the government as providing an essential service, there were no access restrictions from local authorities, but staff safety and health concerns did end up curtailing field visits later on.
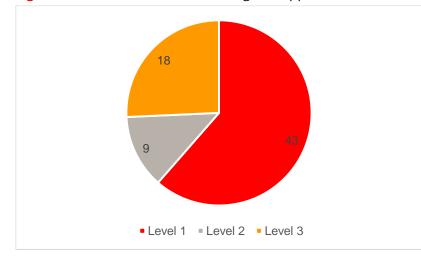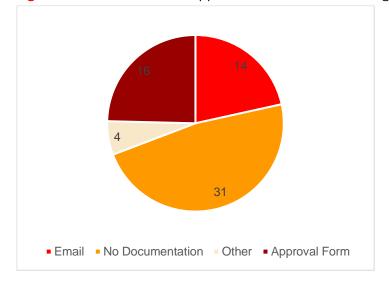
Figure 1: Levels of remote monitoring that applied to Christian Aid projects during the study period

4.1.2   How was remote monitoring approved?

The decision to deviate from normal monitoring practice as outlined in the project MEL plans was mostly made by project staff facing the need to monitor activities in spite of the COVID-19 restrictions, and five respondents referred to holding informal discussions with partners through virtual meetings and phone calls to agree the remote monitoring practice. Some respondents reported that they lacked timely knowledge on the existence of the Remote Monitoring Policy and Guidelines and, therefore, developed their own strategies to guide their adapted practice, though they noted that their strategies were not different from the guidance given.

The current Remote Monitoring Policy provides an approval form which should be signed by the Programme Manager or the Country Manager upon agreement to move to remote monitoring practice, unless the country is a high-risk country in terms of Financial Crime and Abuse, in which case the Head of Division should sign off. The survey explored the extent to which this procedure was followed.

Out of the 65 projects, 16 (25%) received approval from the Programme/Country Manager using the approval form in the Remote Monitoring Policy, and for 18 projects (28%), approval was documented by other means, i.e., by email or written approvals from the donor. Thirty-one (48%) of the projects did not have any form of documentation (see Figure 2 below). Some respondents said that because there was a push by management towards remote monitoring, they understood this as automatic approval to use remote monitoring practice in all cases. Two KII respondents explained this by saying that remote monitoring 'was a natural reaction to the COVID-19 situation since project monitoring had to continue.'

Figure 2: Documentation of approval for remote monitoring

Email ■ No Documentation ■ Other ■ Approval Form

In one case it was noted that as Christian Aid does not have a country office in that country, remote monitoring is standard practice, i.e., monitoring is implemented by third-party monitors as a matter of course, so no adaptation was needed to respond to the COVID-19 situation.

Following up on the need for formal approval with the key informants, they all reiterated that approval when a project moves from 'normal' monitoring to remote monitoring should be documented. The reasons given included that it ensures the decision to potentially reduce the data collected takes into account the minimum contractual requirements for institutional donors; that it shows that risk management has taken place and mitigation measures have been put in place; and it ensures that project staff can be held to account in terms of their project monitoring responsibilities.

'A written decision-making trail is really important, to show that risk management has taken place – that there is an awareness of the increased risks, and steps have been taken to mitigate against them. We want a culture of risk management and accountability, rather than an oversight culture.'

4.1.3 How were monitoring methodologies adapted?

To collect data without accessing primary stakeholders directly, monitoring methodologies were adapted during remote monitoring.

Methodologies that were most commonly adapted by staff were (see also Figure 3 below):

- **Internal meetings**, which included MEL planning meetings and team meetings, and **external meetings** with partners, stakeholders and regular community meetings: respondents reported that they organised meetings through telephone calls, emails and WhatsApp. Most of the meetings were held through virtual platforms (Zoom and MS Teams).

- **Complaints and feedback mechanisms**: adaptations mentioned included the use of toll-free lines instead of using a suggestion box placed in a central location that would require them to travel; recording feedback on accountability trackers/logbooks; setting up a help desk – this involved a

dedicated team of staff (especially MEAL staff) that assisted programme staff to provide information to project stakeholders; and adapting the COMPASS platform[11] by adding COVID-19 related questions to be entered by partners/volunteers/ community resource persons using mobile phones. Two respondents indicated that they directly solicited feedback from project stakeholders after every engagement or online meeting with stakeholders through phone calls and WhatsApp messaging to the community focal point persons, and one respondent highlighted that emerging data analysis was shared immediately with partners to facilitate rapid adaptation of project delivery. Seven of the twelve respondents providing project-level information used COMPASS in projects for complaints and feedback. One key informant noted that COMPASS was only used in humanitarian projects and proposed for it to be rolled out to other projects, but also highlighted that one of the limitations of using COMPASS was a lack of android phones/gadgets to capture concerns and feedback and delayed review of feedback.

- **Monitoring visits**: most respondents confirmed that visits were mainly carried out by partner staff, who were provided with templates to complete and were asked to submit them along with photos as evidence where possible; for some projects dashboards were prepared as part of the move to remote monitoring, to enable automatic data processing into results; some mentioned using volunteers based in the community to provide information from the community to the partners and Christian Aid staff, as would be typical of remote monitoring at Level 2; third-party monitors carried out monitoring visits for some projects – another example of Level 2 remote monitoring. Some projects reported that some monitoring visits by Christian Aid staff did go ahead but less frequently, i.e., when delivering humanitarian assistance and when COVID-19 measures were relaxed.

- **Surveys/Post Distribution Monitoring (PDM)**: as most of the survey data was collected through KoBo Collect, data enumerators were trained on how to collect data through virtual platforms such as mobile phone surveys, WhatsApp messaging and social media, and the GPS function of KoBo Collect was used to record the location from where data was collected. In one project, Christian Aid staff carried out PDM physically while others entrusted partner staff to undertake the activities and to submit reports; three projects used host community members as volunteers to collect PDM data and transmit it through the implementing partner; four projects engaged third-party monitors, who accompanied partner staff during distributions for monitoring and verification against primary target group lists. Analysis of PDM reports was then used to assess progress of project work – one respondent stated that to ensure inclusion of the marginalised, the two projects supported deliberately chose and trained representatives from marginalised groups as data enumerators.

- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) / Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)**: nine projects adapted FGDs by involving small, clustered persons in open spaces while also adhering to social distancing measures and using PPE; four other projects engaged third-party monitors to collect data through FGDs; KIIs were conducted through phone calls and use of virtual platforms. Some respondents also mentioned that all participatory activities were cancelled for a period of time.

- **Other meetings (learning and review)**: respondents mentioned that quarterly review and learning meetings with partners and community members were done through virtual platforms as opposed to physical meetings; proceedings for these meetings were documented and circulated widely by email amongst relevant stakeholders. One key informant mentioned that the online platforms were actually more inclusive, as participants were able to join from more locations than if they had been held in person.

- **Financial data collection**: partners were asked to prepare financial reports in templates provided by Christian Aid finance staff and to submit them along with scanned supporting documents; some staff reported that after review of the submitted reports by Christian Aid finance staff, Christian Aid

organised virtual meetings with partners to provide them with comments and feedback for improvement; financial monitoring by third-party monitors was also mentioned; some partners sent their paper trail to the finance officers for review, who then conducted field verifications during joint monitoring support visits with other programme staff as soon as it was possible.

- **Data collection on agricultural production**: adaptation in this area mainly involved ensuring social distancing and wearing PPE during data collection, and some staff reported to have strengthened the capacity of partner organisations to collect and report on such data; in other countries, contracts were awarded to consultants to provide technical services to follow-up and measure performance in a COVID-19 safe way. Christian Aid project staff shared the monitoring tools that guided measuring of agriculture produce with the implementing staff in different locations to enhance continuity in data collection.

- **Other means of data collection**: other adaptations used during COVID-19 for remote monitoring included: regular context and conflict analysis by third-party monitors; greater use of phone call engagements with local authorities, community leaders and volunteers to check on key situational changes on the ground and for triangulation in case project staff needed to follow up or verify activities as reported.
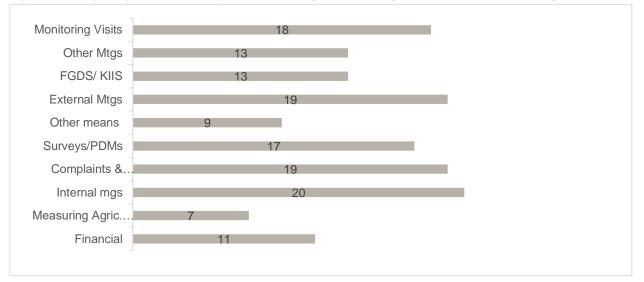
Figure 3: Frequency of use of adapted monitoring methodologies for remote monitoring

4.2 How remote monitoring affected programme delivery and risk management

Objective 2: To assess to what extent remote monitoring influenced the delivery and/or quality of programming (positive or negative), and to assess the corporate risks associated with remote monitoring (safeguarding, misuse of funds, fraud, and responsible data management).

4.2.1 Effect of remote monitoring on programme accountability

Most respondents noted that the switch to remote monitoring did not prevent or significantly hinder project implementation. They noted that remote monitoring allowed for flexibility in data collection both in terms of the amount of data to be collected and the mode of data collection. Remote monitoring reduced risk to Christian Aid and partner staff as compared with a complete monitoring stop and facilitated accountability in complex and rapidly changing environments. It enabled quick decision making as information (especially via social media and phone) could be received in real time and analysed,

especially when projects utilised KoBo Collect. Remote monitoring saved on resources (money and time) as travel was reduced.

Remote monitoring also brought distinct advantages, such as the capacity to engage more frequently with implementing staff and even primary stakeholders. More partners could be supported in their monitoring activities in a timely and cost-effective manner as opposed to in-person meetings that required a lot of planning and were time consuming when travelling from one location to another.

However, respondents also mentioned that remote monitoring led to losing touch with the local situation and communities. Christian Aid staff had fewer opportunities to understand the programme work and context. This is especially the case for programme staff who were operating from different countries to the countries where projects were being implemented.
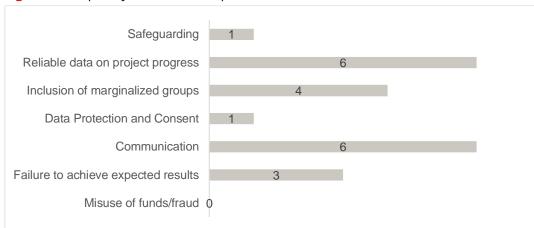
'I did not like that I almost did not interact face to face with primary stakeholders, something that is highly valued by both Christian Aid and community members, and that I did not feel secure about having the right methodologies to do so.'

Respondents also highlighted that remote monitoring resulted in a reduction in the breadth and quality of the data. For example, the reduction in FGDs and interviews resulted in less qualitative data, especially in relation to behavioural and social change. Respondents also noted that for remote monitoring, partner data collection tended to focus on output-level results, with less emphasis on the outcome-level stories of change. Validation and triangulation of information was often not possible, or was more time consuming, as Christian Aid staff were not able to verify the progress of programmes against what was reported through on-site visits. Instead, Christian Aid staff attempted to triangulate by phoning partners or community members individually, often requesting additional photo evidence. Some respondents mentioned that they had to relinquish control and delegate to people who may not have had the same level of data collection and analysis skills. In some cases, information was not received in a timely manner due to challenges related to network/connectivity and limited technological capacity of local community members.

Remote monitoring also made Christian Aid more vulnerable to losing donor confidence since the normal mechanisms of coordination and oversight of project delivery through partnership was not possible. Some staff felt this posed the risk that the competitiveness of Christian Aid would diminish in the future, since other organisations funded by these same donors had not opted for remote monitoring and this put Christian Aid on the back foot. One key informant felt that 'if Christian Aid is charging salaries for positions in the field, but they are sitting in offices or home, then the value as perceived by the donor is less.'

4.2.2   Effect of remote monitoring on programme risk

The internal review sought to assess whether certain risks increased or decreased as a result of remote monitoring of projects. The risks relating to remote monitoring that were highlighted in the survey included (see Figure 4 below):

Figure 4: Frequency with which respondents mentioned risk factors

Lack of reliable data on project progress

As mentioned above, respondents highlighted the risk of reduction in data quality coming through to them, both in terms of completeness and in terms of robustness. Examples given included not being able to report on some indicators and not being able to disaggregate some target populations due to missing data. Respondents also reported that sometimes they were not sure if the reports reflected the reality on the ground and whether they incorporated the views of community members, as Christian Aid staff were reliant on data provided by partners and some intended primary target groups could not be reached during data collection, e.g., when using post distribution surveys. However, as already mentioned, the higher level of virtual communication seemed to have mitigated against this risk in many situations.

One KII respondent stated that while 'oversight of programme quality and verification did diminish, [and] the quality of project reporting was lower, … this was not just because of remote monitoring.' This point highlights that there were many other constraints to working in the COVID-19 pandemic that have compounded the difficulties around data collection, including the personal stress and strain under which staff, partners and community members have been working.

Communication problems between Christian Aid and Partners

As highlighted above, a key strategy in mitigating against the loss of first-hand monitoring was to move data collection and communications 'online'. However, poor connectivity/network in some locations and inadequate technological capacity of some partners hindered good communication, resulting in gaps in information that could not be filled. However, overall, no respondents mentioned that the challenges in communication resulted in a deterioration in the partnership relationship itself. All respondents felt that there was a high level of trust between Christian Aid staff and partners, which did not lead to an increased risk to the relationship as a result of remote monitoring.

Inadequate inclusion of marginalised groups in project activities

COVID-19 did affect the projects' capacity to ensure inclusion of marginalised groups, such as older people and people living with disabilities since some were particularly affected by COVID-19 restrictions. This was compounded by the low levels of phone/internet connectivity in hard-to-reach locations. One respondent reported that inclusion, especially of people with disabilities, had been identified as a gap by third-party monitors. This was later discussed with the implementing partners. However, there does appear to be a need to make an increased effort with inclusion, especially during remote monitoring.

Failure to achieve expected results

Several respondents identified this as a potential risk, but no concrete examples of this were given. One key informant reported that the risk that a project was not delivered at all was higher, though not very likely to be higher than in 'normal' circumstances. Failure to implement reported activities would be classified under financial crime. The respondent, however, felt that remote monitoring could adequately mitigate it by providing reasonable assurance that activities were happening.

Safeguarding

According to organisational safeguarding reports, there were 55% fewer cases of safeguarding concerns reported between March and December 2020 as compared to March to December 2019. However, from the data collected in this review it is not possible to assess whether this is due to a reduction in safeguarding cases occurring, perhaps because of a reduction in physical contact between people during restricted movement, or a reduction in cases being picked up and reported, i.e., due to the limitations of remote monitoring or increased barriers to using complaints and feedback mechanisms. Further analysis of this issue may be warranted.

Misuse of funds or fraud

A similar picture emerges around misuse of funds or fraud. In the fiscal year 20/21, there were 39% fewer cases of misuse of funds or fraud compared to the previous year, with the reduction being highest from April to August, when the disruption to programming as a result of the pandemic was greatest. Indeed, none of the respondents said that the risk of misuse of funds or fraud increased due to remote monitoring. However, it is not possible to say, based on the data collected in this review, whether the reduction reflects a decrease in cases, or a problem picking up these cases using remote monitoring. One hypothesis is that reporting on misuse of funds was temporarily reduced because the demands of responding to the pandemic as well as the understandable need to respect public health measures and ensure health and safety of staff, may have impacted monitoring and oversight activities, which play an important role in detection of cases. One key informant observed that while there was a significant reduction in reported cases from April to August, from September cases quickly returned to more normal levels, even though remote monitoring was still being employed. This seems to imply that if no monitoring is in place, risk goes up, but once any type of monitoring is in place, including remote monitoring if done properly, this will pick up on issues.

4.3   Remote monitoring and localisation

Objective 3: To assess how remote monitoring helped or hindered our commitment to localisation, especially working in partnerships.

Because remote monitoring is a form of Christian Aid stepping back and partners taking on a greater role in accountability, there was an interest to determine whether remote monitoring helped or hindered our commitment to localisation and working in partnerships.

4.3.1   How was remote monitoring practice agreed with partners?

There was quite a lot of variation in how remote monitoring was negotiated with partners, as each programme emphasised the remote monitoring roll out in different ways. Various respondents said that frequent virtual meetings were scheduled with partners to inform them on their monitoring roles and data to be collected, complemented by phone and email communications on what was needed to be delivered, such as the reporting formats and details required. Partners' responsibility to fulfil on reporting and monitoring as per the Funding and Reporting Agreement was recognised, as was Christian Aid's commitment to training implementing partner staff remotely on how to use the tools. The partners then

shared feedback with Christian Aid on issues identified from the use of the tools. One of the respondents stated that they shared terms of reference for remote monitoring with the partners for review before agreeing the roles for data collection and the timeframes between Christian Aid, the partner and community-based data collectors. Others mentioned that in the end, there was not a formal process of negotiation – due to the context presented by COVID-19 Christian Aid and partners both knew they needed to migrate to remote monitoring.

One respondent mentioned that partners were able to continue monitoring in line with the original MEL plan developed before COVID-19 restrictions – in this case Christian Aid had already adopted a more localised approach from the start of the project, which held up during the unfolding events. Another respondent reported that new COVID-19 MEL plans were developed and adapted, which set out the new outputs, outcomes, means of verification, agreed timelines and the roles and responsibility of the partner and of Christian Aid staff. One key informant stated that Christian Aid staff developed a checklist to help the partner adapt their monitoring practice to the COVID-19 reality. This checklist was then shared with partner staff for their review and suggestions for improvement.

One respondent also recognised that in many situations the role of Christian Aid on monitoring did not significantly change, as even in normal monitoring practice it is the role of partners to monitor activities and progress towards expected results, with Christian Aid staff only visiting the programme sites once or twice a year, under normal circumstances.

'In all our monitoring plans, partners also have a role in monitoring. There are instances where Christian Aid and partners do joint monitoring. This the partners are aware of from start of project and hence there are no surprises.'

4.3.2 Benefits and challenges of remote monitoring regarding the partnership relationship

According to the respondents and interviewees, remote monitoring brought both benefits and challenges to the partnership relationship.

Monitoring practice

Remote monitoring provided a push towards transferring M&E skills to partner staff as they were asked to take over more of the monitoring responsibilities in communities and to donors.

One respondent reported that some of their partners gained additional knowledge and experience in using KoBo Collect for remote monitoring, and that it had led to one of the partners even taking up digital monitoring for all projects they were working on. Another respondent highlighted that partners ended up being more directly responsible for responding to complaints and feedback, and for adapting their projects accordingly. One key informant stated that remote monitoring also enhanced partners' presentation skills to external stakeholders, as they presented findings on project progress back to donors. In addition, it enhanced partners' active participation in decision-making around projects. One key informant stated that remote monitoring pushed partners to be more self-reliant as opposed to being fully dependent on Christian Aid.

On the other hand, some respondents mentioned that implementing partners lacked adequate capacity to undertake remote monitoring, especially in relation to the more complex data collection around behavioural and social change, and in some instances, there was reluctance to adapt the M&E approach. Others cited lack of appropriate technology for digital data collection among partner staff. This reflected

the fact that the urgency prevailing in the COVID-19 response did not allow for adequate capacity development to take place in the face of the new M&E demands.

Trust and balance of power

Remote monitoring is still subject to the accountability demands of institutional donors, which Christian Aid staff are responsible for, and thus the balance of power remains unequal. Overall, though, respondents agreed that remote monitoring was an opportunity to promote localisation and a greater balance of power between the partners and Christian Aid.

'When Christian Aid staff travel in to visit programmes this creates a different power dynamic than when local partners carry it out. Remote monitoring empowers (builds the capacity of) partners/community members to... take charge of their own development.'

Remote monitoring strengthened communication between Christian Aid and partners and contributed towards the creation of greater responsibility and commitment towards the Partnership Agreement. Some respondents said that the move to remote monitoring led to more communication, though that was by phone/email. After agreeing on the activities to be conducted both signatories had to demonstrate commitment in a situation of much less follow up.

But at the same time some respondents mentioned that it was hard to ensure that partner staff felt confident and open to talk about their mistakes and negative news as well as keeping Christian Aid informed on project progress, and that it was hard to keep partner staff motivated to keep going. This relates of course not only to remote monitoring but also to the huge personal cost of working during the pandemic.

In addition, one key informant indicated that working with partners during remote monitoring needed to be managed carefully as it could result in disgruntlement and a feeling of mistrust. There was definitely an assumption that moving from normal monitoring to remote monitoring increased occurrence of risks, which resulted in heightened vigilance from Christian Aid staff and affected the trust between Christian Aid and partners. The key informant stated that during initial stages some partners had given feedback about feeling micro-managed as Christian Aid staff sometimes directly phoned primary stakeholder groups to get first-hand information on project progress. Another key informant stated that it is more difficult to maintain an open, strong and transparent relationship if you are not able to visit partners as regularly or interact directly with partner staff.

4.4   Viability of remote monitoring as normal monitoring practice

Objective 4: To recommend any changes or improvements to Christian Aid's Remote Monitoring Policy and Guidelines, and to the new programme management system (iPIMS), to inform future programming practice

One of the underlying questions driving this learning review was to assess whether we could learn from the experience of undertaking remote monitoring during the COVID-19 pandemic and apply it more widely and effectively to our normal programming practice. When asked to share their opinion on whether remote monitoring presented a viable alternative to 'normal' monitoring practice, respondents mostly reported that they would consider remote monitoring as a viable alternative to normal MEL practice, but only as a blended option not as a stand-alone. They suggested the following to improve Christian Aid's remote monitoring practice if it were to be used more widely and as standard practice:

Internal

- Create greater staff awareness on remote monitoring policies and guidelines, for example by providing training, highlighting it in the MEL CoPs and ongoing programme support, and creating opportunities for remote monitoring exchanges to build knowledge and skills across teams e.g., a Kenyan staff member monitoring an Indian project (alongside Indian staff).

- Maintain a commitment to adapting remote monitoring to the various country contexts: it should be contextualised such that different countries can do remote monitoring as it works for them.

- Build capacity of Christian Aid MEL staff on data collection technology and reporting using remote monitoring.

- Strengthen the emphasis on high quality data collection, e.g., triangulation of information reported by partners with different sources before reporting, and training staff on remote data quality reviews.

- Plan ahead by including options for remote monitoring into the MEL Plan, even when normal monitoring is happening, so that Christian Aid and partners can quickly adopt it when needed.

- Develop software apps and other tools which can be adapted to capture the information required in a variety of projects.

- Allocate more funds to support remote monitoring activities

Partners and other stakeholders

- Undertake scenario planning with partners for MEL activities (best case, worst case, and most likely scenarios) to have clarity on which aspects can be captured through remote monitoring and which cannot and adjusting data requirements based on different working contexts.

- Train partners on remote monitoring methodologies and provide electronic devices and software apps to partners for digital data collection.

- Routine capacity building for partner staff and community stakeholders on data collection technology and reporting.

- Lobby with donors, primary target groups and other stakeholders to create buy-in for a remote monitoring approach, emphasising particularly its potential contribution to the localisation agenda.

5   Recommendations and Conclusion

Bringing together the findings and analysis of all survey and key informant responses, there are a few key recommendations that can be made if Christian Aid is to consider continuing to use remote monitoring. These would apply both where remote monitoring is used as a risk management tool in situations where project staff cannot access field locations, and whenever the roles and capacities of partners and third-party monitors would suggest that this approach is an effective alternative or complement to 'normal' field monitoring.

5.1   Recommendations

Overall, there is recognition that when no field access is possible, remote monitoring is the best option available to collect data on project/programme performance, and that any increase in programme risk as a result is acceptable in the short term.

If Christian Aid moves to remote monitoring more widely as part of standard programme management, the following recommendations must be considered:

1.   Remote monitoring requires staff to weigh up the pros and cons of reducing their access to information on project progress (e.g., by reducing amount and type of data to be collected, adapting tools to be used for data collection, who will collect data and how often). This is key to risk management. Greater emphasis must be placed on sensitising Christian Aid staff on how to move from 'normal' to remote monitoring practice using the existing Remote Monitoring Policy and Guidelines, and by actively revising the project MEL Plans.

2.   Remote monitoring requires additional and different skills and capacities of Christian Aid and partners. Resources for that shift will need to be identified and mobilised quickly, as part of the approval process. Where access is highly restricted, capacity building of partners is paramount for remote monitoring to be successful, and to ensure that associated risks do not increase. Before moving to remote monitoring, an assessment of partner capacity on M&E must be done and documented. In particular, Christian Aid needs to ensure the capacity of partners on data collection including using digital technology, data verification through triangulation and reporting is in place. In addition, considering that remote monitoring is highly dependent on technology, it is important to set aside adequate budget for acquisition of appropriate IT hardware (tablets, phones) for data collectors and community-based monitors, and to enable access to technology that supports offline data collection where internet connectivity is low.

3.   Especially in humanitarian programming, the decision to move to remote monitoring must consider donor expectations for implementation, and how other international NGOs are adapting to situations with increased risk for project staff. Christian Aid risks losing funding if they are seen by donors to be the only organisation pulling back from field monitoring, resulting in reduced accountability and lack of visibility with donors. The two risks – staff safety and income stability – need to be balanced out on an ongoing basis by organisational incident management teams, i.e., an initial highly risk averse approach, with a recommendation to move to 100% remote monitoring, might be adjusted on a country by country, month by month basis, to ensure we are managing the two risks effectively.

4.   In order to mitigate the heightened risk that inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised groups in programme activities may suffer during periods where remote monitoring becomes necessary, project officers working with data collectors will need to ensure that revised data collection methodologies are still able to collect information about how the project has included people who might have been left behind – how this is done should be spelled out in the revised MEL Plan.

5.   This review of remote monitoring practice did not conclusively evidence an increased risk related to financial monitoring or related to safeguarding. However, there was anecdotal evidence that a move to remote monitoring reduced the frequency of identification of safeguarding cases and misuse of funds in the short term, sometimes followed by an increase of cases as the situation normalised. This implies that remote monitoring does indeed reduce our capacity to identify financial and safeguarding issues, and this should also be taken into account when deciding to move to remote monitoring. Where remote monitoring is employed, it is important that the MEL Plan includes measures to prevent and detect financial and safeguarding issues. This is important with any type of monitoring, but particularly so in remote monitoring where there isn't the opportunity to gain direct assurance on completion of activities through visits to projects and interaction with the people and communities involved. The safeguarding risks associated with a move to remove monitoring should be assessed in the project safeguarding risk assessment and mitigations put in place.

6.   Remote monitoring is an opportunity for Christian Aid to advance its localisation agenda, but there are both benefits and challenges to consider. Remote monitoring is still subject to accountability demands of institutional donors, which Christian Aid staff are responsible for, and thus the balance of power remains unequal. However, by cultivating strong and equitable partnership relationships Christian Aid can

use remote monitoring to increase partner ownership of data as well as of project decision-making. Remote monitoring does require a higher level of M&E capacity at partner (and community) level, so Christian Aid's commitment to support partner M&E practice should be built into the project budgets.

7.   As much as remote monitoring saves on time and budget, it is not recommended as a full substitute for 'normal' monitoring, unless it is the only option in a particular context. Given the long list of recommendations by people surveyed/interviewed as to how to improve remote monitoring practice and given our resource constraints on providing programme quality support, it is unlikely that remote monitoring practice will be optimal in all situations where it is applied. However, where projects and programmes have been field monitored every month or every quarter, there seems to be an opportunity to move to a model where Christian Aid field monitoring is reduced and we rely more on partner monitoring, which also supports the localisation approach. The Christian Aid minimum requirement of 'at least two Monitoring Visit Reports completed per year per project (at least one of these includes a visit to project sites)' should continue to apply.

8.   Recognising that remote monitoring may well be used more widely in future than it has been in the past, it is important to make sure how we collect data through remote monitoring can be captured in the M&E database, which will be a part of iPIMS. The findings of this review should be considered during the design phase of iPIMS and inform what information we collect and how it is input into the system.

5.2   Recommendations for further studies

The study only focused on Christian Aid staff experiences of remote monitoring of projects. In order to further explore the opportunities that remote monitoring brings for localisation, experiences of partner staff/representatives and primary stakeholders need to be sought. A number of case studies are in development to reflect partner perspectives on remote monitoring and complement this learning review.

5.3   Conclusion

With the roll out of COVID-19 vaccines, it is hoped that the COVID-19 situation will come to an end and project management activities can resume. However remote monitoring is likely to remain an important strategy in Christian Aid's M&E practice rather than a last resort. It has clear benefits when programme staff are faced with challenges in accessing very remote locations, movement restrictions due to health and safety concerns, resource constraints, and other unforeseeable future events that are likely to impede field access. It is hoped that the experiences shared in this learning review, and in particular its recommendations, will act as a catalyst to improve remote monitoring policies and practice and facilitate wider use across Christian Aid programming.

End notes

[1] Sida L., Oakley L.; 2019. Remote Monitoring in SDC: Challenges and Opportunities. Humanitarian Learning Centre (HLC). Briefing Note10. https://www.shareweb.ch/site/Poverty-Wellbeing/resources/Documents/SDC-IDS%20BriefingNote%2010_LSida_and_LOakley.pdf

[2] Christian Aid's Remote Project Monitoring Policy

[3] Steets et al., 2012. 'Evaluation and Review of Humanitarian Access Strategies in DG ECHO Funded Interventions', *Global Public Policy Institute*. https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/evaluation/2012/GPPi_Access-Report.pdf

[4] Chaudhri S., Cordes K., & Miller N., 2017. Humanitarian Programming and Monitoring in Inaccessible Conflict Settings: A Literature Review. https://www.who.int/health-cluster/resources/publications/remote-lit-review.pdf

[5] Dette, R. & Steets, J. 2016. 'Innovating for access: the role of technology in monitoring aid in highly insecure environments.' In Fenton, W., Scriven, K., and Foley, M., [Ed. s], 'Humanitarian innovation', Humanitarian Exchange, 66, 13-17. https://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/HE-66-WebFinal.pdf

[6] Donini, A. 2011. 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Integration or Independence of Humanitarian Action?' *International Review of the Red Cross. International Committee of the Red Cross*. https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc-881-donini.pdf

[7] Donini A. & Maxwell D., 2014. From Face-to-Face To Face-to-Screen: Remote Management, Effectiveness and Accountability of Humanitarian Action in Insecure Environments. *International Review of the Red Cross. https://international-review*.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc-890-donini-maxwell.pdf

[8] Steets et al., 2012. 'Evaluation and Review of Humanitarian Access Strategies in DG ECHO Funded Interventions', Global Public Policy Institute. https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/evaluation/2012/GPPi_Access-Report.pdf

[9] Department for International Development. 2015. *No Longer a Last Resort: A Review of the Remote Programming Landscape*. Working Paper. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/405265/review-remote-prog-landscaping.pdf

[10] UN IOM. 2020. *Continuity of Monitoring and Evaluation Interventions during COVID-19*. https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/about-iom/evaluation/me-continuity-in-covid-08-april-20-version1.pdf

[11] COMPASS is Christian Aid's bespoke Feedback and Complaints Mechanism, which is designed to facilitate secure and responsible data management, and to ensure the feedback loop back to the source of the feedback or complaint is closed.