MONITORING &
EVALUATION

ALNAP

From Real-Time Evaluation to Real-Time Learning

Exploring new approaches from the COVID-19 response

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

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AAR	After Action Review
AMR	Adaptive Management Review
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability
DEC	Disasters Emergency Committee
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FGD	focus group discussion
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
KII	Key informant interview
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MEAL	Monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OECD DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Development Assistance Committee
RTA	Real-Time Assessment
RTE	Real-Time Evaluation
RTL	Real-Time Learning
RTR	Real-Time Review
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme

All quotes in green are from key informants interviewed for this paper and have been anonymised.

Overview

The scale and nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has required development and humanitarian actors to swiftly adapt their ways of working. The need to understand, analyse and act in rapidly changing and unfamiliar contexts has renewed interest in Real-Time Learning – and in its relevance for humanitarian response.

Six reasons why Real-Time Learning is relevant for operational humanitarian and development actors

- **Traditional evaluation approaches are often not sufficiently adaptive, flexible and timely** to meet immediate learning needs, while ongoing monitoring may reveal gaps in information with little time for in-depth analysis and reflection.
- **Real-Time Learning approaches can help fill the gap between monitoring and evaluation** in contexts where there is a need to understand and learn from the humanitarian response as it evolves, supporting adaptive management.
- Real-Time Learning approaches, adapted to an organisation's specific learning needs and culture, **create space for innovative and flexible ways to support rapid organisational learning**, appropriate to the context and with shorter feedback loops.
- Real-Time Learning is user-focused and more likely to **promote the utilisation of emerging lessons and findings in ongoing response** and decision-making.
- Real-Time Learning exercises can be designed to **provide a safe space for staff to pause, reflect and share** what has not worked as well as achievements and successes.
- Real-Time Learning helps to **capture individual staff knowledge to support and document wider organisational learning**.

There has been a high degree of experimentation with Real-Time Evaluations (RTEs) and Real Time-Learning (RTL) approaches since the onset of the pandemic. This paper reviews the RTL approaches that have been adopted, drawing out lessons and implications for future evaluation practice.

Three key messages on Real-Time Learning

When designing Real-Time Learning exercises, it is important to be guided by the learning needs of the organisation and key stakeholders rather than by standard evaluation protocols and labels. There are two key questions to guide RTL exercises:

- How is this exercise adding value at this time?
- What do we need to learn and how can we best meet the learning needs of the organisation as well as groups of individuals within the organisation?

Real-Time Learning can take many forms. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) staff can choose from a range of evaluative approaches and methods. They should be prepared to experiment and find creative solutions which best fit the individual context(s) and organisational needs and culture.

In planning RTL exercises for a global response, it is important to consider phasing and how it can be layered. Breaking an exercise into component parts can ensure it is both manageable and responsive to the various learning needs at different organisational levels (from head office to regional and country offices). This may include:

- **phased sequencing**, whereby different phases of the exercise have a different focus
- **layering the approach**, to address multiple learning needs simultaneously
- **designing a framework** that provides options from which country and regional offices may choose, and opt into or out of, to ensure ownership.

The COVID-19 response: Why new approaches to learning are needed

1 The COVID-19 response: Why new approaches to learning are needed

1.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic catapulted organisations into uncharted territory in terms of how to adapt programming and provide appropriate humanitarian assistance, at scale. This, in turn, triggered a surge of interest in Real-Time Evaluation (RTE) and Real-Time Learning (RTL) among humanitarian organisations and international development actors. Organisations had to quickly adapt their ways of working to protect staff, frontline workers and the people and communities affected by COVID-19, often in the midst of other ongoing humanitarian crises. At the same time, it became increasingly difficult to conduct traditional, formal evaluations due to travel restrictions and access constraints, despite the demand for timely, relevant learning about efforts to respond to COVID-19. As many humanitarian organisations deviated from their 'standard' monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practice and protocols because of the pandemic, there has been a burst of experimentation and creativity and a willingness to innovate. This eagerness to learn and to adapt evaluative approaches has generated a range of RTL exercises.

This wave of 'evaluative experimentation' stands in sharp contrast to more formalised and procedural approaches to evaluation that have become commonplace as evaluation practice is increasingly professionalised and standardised.[1] There has also been a notable shift from RTEs to an expanded range of RTL processes using a wide variety of different approaches, with different timeframes, scope and focus. This paper covers the full range of RTL exercises that have been adopted since the start of the pandemic.

For the purpose of this paper, **Real-Time Learning** is defined as a range of evaluative approaches, reviews and assessments with the purpose of understanding and articulating issues that need to be addressed in an ongoing development or humanitarian response, that can be fed back immediately into programming, decision-making and management processes with the overall aim of improving the response. Effective RTL approaches:

- have **learning as their clear objective** rather than upward accountability

- make use of informal processes and **less structured evaluation approaches**, creating a safe learning space, while still applying a systematic approach

- are **flexible and experimental in practice and approach**, according to the learning needs and culture of the organisation

- pay attention to facilitating **participatory learning processes** over an 'independent' and objective evaluation approach

- capture and **document processes, adaptation and decision-making**, including as these unfold

- generate **rapid feedback and actionable learning**, with a limited focus on attribution

- may produce documents that remain internal to the organisation as they are not designed to fulfil an upwards accountability function, and thus **ensure a 'safe space' for learning**.

1.2 Purpose, aims and audience for this paper

This paper is intended to support development and humanitarian managers, evaluation functions and evaluators as they plan and implement Real-Time Evaluations and Real-Time Learning exercises of their respective organisation's COVID-19 response, and of future humanitarian action. The paper:

- Briefly describes RTE practice in the humanitarian sector and how it differs from other forms of evaluation (section 2.1, and Annex 1 on the history of RTEs).

- Explains why humanitarian agencies developed a range of RTL exercises beyond conventional RTEs to meet their organisation's learning needs during the COVID-19 response (section 2.2).

- Reviews the practice and approaches of different humanitarian organisations in conducting a range of RTL exercises, to offer practical examples, advice and insights for evaluation practitioners, with key messages drawn from the growing body of such exercises (section 3).

- Concludes by demonstrating how COVID-19 RTL exercises have advanced learning practices within the humanitarian sector (section 4).

The review of RTL practices and approaches follows the conventional evaluation phasing which also applies to most RTL exercises: 1) the inception and launch of an RTL exercise; 2) implementing the RTL exercise; and 3) the analysis of findings, formulation of recommendations and dissemination. The paper complements ALNAP's existing evaluation guidance, including ALNAP's Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide and the 2009 ALNAP Guide to Real-Time Evaluations of Humanitarian Action. It provides additional information and lessons for evaluation managers and evaluators on how to approach RTL exercises based on recent experience.

The shift to more flexible RTL exercises may become more common in future humanitarian crises beyond the COVID-19 response. Recent RTL exercises have shown what is possible, using evaluation approaches in more 'light touch' and innovative ways. As the number and complexity of humanitarian and development crises continue to rise (in relation to climate change, forced migration, and increasing levels of poverty and inequality), RTL exercises offer a new model for organisational learning in the midst of complex crises.

1.3 Methodology

The paper draws on the following:

- a review of the literature on Real-Time Evaluations, published and unpublished, including the 2009 ALNAP Guide to Real-Time Evaluations of Humanitarian Action[2]

- a review of more than a dozen RTL exercises related to COVID-19 conducted by various humanitarian organisations between 2020 and 2021

- 14 key informant interviews (KIIs) with evaluation managers and evaluators who have had an active role in these RTL exercises (see Annex 2 for a list of key informants)

- a peer-to-peer exchange on evaluation strategy and practice during COVID-19 with a session on RTL at ALNAP's M&E peer-learning workshop with senior humanitarian evaluation managers and heads of evaluation in February 2021.[3]

The paper highlights the heterogeneity of approaches and evaluative frameworks used in recent RTL experiences during the Pandemic, while also identifying some common themes. The paper is deliberatively non-prescriptive; a key emerging lesson is the need to adapt RTL exercises to the specific context and learning needs of organisations and decision makers.

From Real-Time Evaluation to a variety of Real-Time Learning approaches

2 From Real-Time Evaluation to a variety of Real-Time Learning approaches

2.1 What is a Real-Time Evaluation, and what is its purpose?

Humanitarian organisations have been conducting Real Time Evaluations (RTEs) since the 1990s (see Annex 1 on the history of RTEs in the sector). Various RTE guidance documents have tended to offer similar definitions. The 2009 ALNAP Guide to Real-Time Evaluations of Humanitarian Action defines an RTE as

> an evaluation in which the primary objective is to provide feedback in a participatory way in real time (i.e. during the evaluation process) to those executing and managing the humanitarian response.[4]

In other words, RTEs look at what is happening today to influence tomorrow's planning and programming.

RTEs differ from monitoring as they are both prospective (future-looking) and retrospective (looking at the past – see Box 1). They assess the appropriateness and likely outcomes of ongoing programming and current policies, while monitoring tends to focus more narrowly on outputs, on progress against programme plans and whether targets have been met. Some organisations have used RTEs to fill gaps in information between their monitoring and evaluation functions, particularly in emergency-response settings in rapidly evolving contexts where the shortcomings of both monitoring and traditional evaluation practice may be most acute (Enabel, 2020; FAO, 2021). As RTEs provide almost instant input to an ongoing operational response, they differ from mid-term evaluations which look back at the first phase of the response in order to improve the second phase, and from ex-post evaluations which are essentially retrospective, examining and learning from the past (Polastro, 2011).

Box 1 | Key features of a Real-Time Evaluation (RTE) approach[5]

- Takes place during implementation of the programme or operational response being evaluated – with real-time data collection – thus influencing and informing immediate change.
- Implemented in a fast and flexible way, which may incur a trade-off in terms of rigour and depth.
- Usually focuses primarily on process rather than outcomes or impact
- Intended for instrumental and process use, through real-time reporting back of evaluation data; may also contribute to policy development.
- Organisation staff are centrally involved in the learning process, sense-making and action planning.

Three of the key advantages of an RTE are:

- **Timeliness**: an evaluation that takes place in the early phase of an operation, when key operational and policy decisions are being taken.[6]

- **Interactivity**: real-time evaluators are engaged in sustained dialogue with staff who are the intended users of the RTE, both in the field and at headquarters level.

- **Perspective**: real-time evaluators are able to approach the humanitarian crisis and the response from a range of different angles and vantage points (e.g. head office, regional, country and sub-national levels), thus enriching the evaluation, and bringing knowledge and learning from past crises and humanitarian responses which are incorporated into the evaluation process and outputs.[7]

RTEs are intended to support a dynamic form of learning and also support adaptive management, providing evidence for possible changes in approach, strategy and programming for ongoing humanitarian activities.[8] They primarily have a formative (i.e. learning) purpose but this can become a developmental purpose (contributing to something that is being developed, and/or to new concepts, ideas and ways of thinking) where RTEs trigger the development of a new or changed approach (Patton, 2010 – see Box 2 and section 3.2 of ALNAP's EHA Guide). RTEs are particularly well suited to playing a developmental role in complex and uncertain environments where the process of the evaluation and the learning it generates are more important than monitoring compliance with rigid planning and logical frameworks.[9] An RTE is less likely to play a summative role (i.e. an upwards accountability role), and is not designed for this purpose. Instead, it is intended to provide rapid and timely feedback on what is working, what is not, and what needs to change to improve the relevance and effectiveness of an emergency response. Often there is limited, if any, focus on impact, and the evidence collection and analysis undertaken in RTEs is generally less rigorous and robust than other forms of evaluations (World Vision, 2019).

Box 2 | Developmental Evaluation

'Developmental evaluation refers to long-term, partnering relationships between evaluators and those engaged in innovative initiatives and development. Developmental evaluation processes include asking evaluative questions and gathering information to provide feedback and support developmental decision-making and course corrections along the emergent path. The evaluator is part of a team whose members collaborate to conceptualize, design and test new approaches in a long-term, on-going process of continuous improvement, adaptation, and intentional change. The evaluator's primary function in the team is to elucidate team discussions with evaluative questions, data and logic, and to facilitate data-based assessments and decision-making in the unfolding and developmental processes of innovation.' (Patton, 2008. See also Dillon, 2019).

Figure 1 shows a spectrum of evaluative exercises: those at the left-hand end of the spectrum foster Real-Time Learning.

Figure 1: Spectrum of reflective learning exercises to more formal evaluative options

Allow for less structure and more informality:
Less stringent requirements to adhere to evaluation standards and use evaluation criteria

Call for greater structure:
Expectations to adhere to evaluation standards for design and analysis process and deliverables

| After Action Reviews | Internal Reviews/ Self-evaluations | Real-Time Reviews | Real-Time Evaluations | Formative/ Mid-term evaluation | Evaluations (especially summative) | Meta-evaluations/ Synthesis studies |

Real-Time Learning

- Prioritise learning over (upward) accountability: greater expectations to include and prioritise the views and inputs from programme staff, programme recipients/affected people
- Can use informal processes and internal facilitation
- Focus on experiential basis
- Reflection of direct experience
- Capture process
- Generate rapid feedback and actionable learning
- No expectation to use evaluation criteria or meet criteria of independence

- Prioritise learning over (upward) accountability: but can meet some accountability requirements
- Can use structured process with mixed teams (internal and external facilitation)
- Lower expectations to meet stringent criteria of evaluation independence
- May only aim for indicative findings regarding attribution/contribution of the initiative towards protection outcomes

- Systematic process of inquiry
- Can answer questions on cause-and-effect
- Depending on the approach chosen, can emphasise learning and accountability (forward and/or upward and horizontal)
- Greater expectations to meet evaluation standards for independence, credibility, process and products (quality assurance)

Source: Adapted from ALNAP (2016) and Christoplos and Bonino (2016)

Table 1: Traditional and developmental evaluation compared with Real-Time Evaluation and Real-Time Learning

	Traditional evaluation	Developmental evaluation	Real-Time Evaluation & Real-Time Learning
Purpose	Supports improvement, summative tests and upwards accountability	Supports development of innovation and adaptation in dynamic environments	Generates insights and lessons to support an ongoing operational response
Role and relationships	Positioned as an outsider to assure independence and objectivity	Positioned as an internal team function integrated into the process of gathering and interpreting data, framing issues, and testing model developments	Positioning can be internal, external or mixed; focus is on understanding and facilitating reflection, with lessons often emerging from feedback processes and staff insights
Accountability	Focused on external authorities and funders based on explicit and pre-ordinate criteria	Centred on the innovators' values and commitment to make a difference	Centred on learning and the need to understand and use implicit individual and team insights to generate collective, organisational learning
Evaluation results	Detailed formal reports;[10] validated best practices, generalisable across time and space. Can engender fear of failure	Rapid, real-time feedback; diverse, user-friendly forms of feedback. Evaluation aims to nurture learning	Rapid, real-time feedback; diverse, user-friendly forms of feedback. Evaluation aims to nurture learning (similar to developmental evaluation)
Complexity and uncertainty	Evaluator tries to control design and implementation and the evaluation process	Learning to respond to lack of control; staying in touch with what is unfolding and responding accordingly	Focused on providing a space for reflection, analysis and learning in the midst of an ongoing response, often in complex and uncertain contexts
Standards	Methodological competence and commitment to rigour independence; credibility with external authorities and funders; analytical and critical thinking	Methodological flexibility, eclecticism and adaptability; systems thinking; balance of creative and critical thinking; high tolerance for ambiguity; open and agile; teamwork and people skills; able to facilitate rigorous evidence-based perspectives	Methodological flexibility and adaptability; often focused on generating organisational insights and lessons, using internal data and 'light touch' evaluation methods, with less focus on independence and rigour (which can be variable)

Source: Adapted from Patton (2010) and Patton (2006) in Better Evaluation (2021)[11]

Some of the more common limitations and challenges of RTEs are described in Box 3.

Box 3 | Limitations and challenges of Real-Time Evaluations (RTEs)[12]

- RTEs are of less value when designed in an overly procedural manner more suited to conventional evaluation, as they can lose the lightness and flexibility required of a real-time exercise.
- In cases where the launch of the RTE is slowed down by lengthy contracting processes, the timeliness of the exercise is compromised.
- Finding experienced evaluators with the skills to facilitate the learning element of an RTE is often a challenge as there is a relatively small pool of evaluators with the required skills, and many are booked up months in advance.
- If there is confusion about the objectives of an RTE it may inappropriately be held to the same standards of technical rigour as conventional evaluations, when the focus should be on facilitating learning.
- When an RTE is commissioned (for example by the head office) without adequate consultation and 'buy-in' from programme staff, there can be resistance from those who feel it is imposed upon them as an upward accountability-oriented exercise, when staff are working under considerable pressure.

Overall, the concept and practice of RTEs opened up a more fluid and less prescribed space for evaluation, into which different actors have entered, creating more dynamic learning.

2.2   From Real-Time Evaluations to Real-Time Learning in the COVID-19 response

There has been a new wave of interest in Real-Time Evaluation and other forms of Real-Time Learning since the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic, for reasons that include 'dissatisfaction with traditional evaluation, especially in terms of providing timely information, supporting adaptation and learning, and documenting and learning from this for future innovations' (Rogers, 2020: 11). Some humanitarian actors have seen RTEs as being too institutionalised and inflexible, generating resistance among practitioners who are looking for more dynamic processes that meet their immediate learning needs.

Indeed, by 2020 some agencies had already dropped the RTE label in favour of Real-Time Reviews (RTRs). Real-Time Reviews are often regarded as 'a snap-shot in time' or an opportunity to 'step back and reflect', but are usually lighter and quicker than a fully fledged RTE. They provide rapid feedback on operational performance, while also identifying systemic issues and learning. This lighter and more flexible approach has been the hallmark of Real-Time Learning (RTL) exercises carried out during the first year of the humanitarian response to COVID-19, characterised by a high degree of experimentation and creativity.

The speed with which organisations had to adapt their programming and ways of working because of the global scale of the pandemic, and the lack of a precedent of responding to a recent similar pandemic within living memory, lent an urgency to learning, adaptive management and innovation (see Box 4). As humanitarian needs rose, operational humanitarian agencies faced the choice between 'staying and delivering' versus exercising a duty of care to staff. Should staff be withdrawn from the front line to protect them, and should international staff be recalled from the countries where they were working? International humanitarian agencies working through local partner organisations were similarly faced with the challenge of retreating from the front line as mobility was restricted, becoming increasingly reliant on remote management and monitoring. How could staff in the head office and regional offices best support their colleagues at the country level and on the front line?[13] In the words of one NGO staff member, responding to the global pandemic 'challenged every system we had'. New ways of facilitating learning across multiple country offices, regions and organisations were needed.

'In a crisis of this size, be prepared to hit the pause button to create learning space.'

Box 4 | Key features of adaptive management

- 'Adaptive management' refers to adaptations in response to changes in context or understanding that go beyond everyday good management.
- Adaptive decisions and practices should be evidence-based, informed by monitoring, evaluation and learning mechanisms that support reflection, rigorous evaluative thinking and collective decision-making.
- Adaptive management represents a paradigm shift from linear approaches for planning, implementation and evaluation, to a more iterative approach with multiple decision points, better suited to complex and uncertain contexts and challenges.
- Organisational culture, staffing and mindsets are key to effective adaptive management.
- Adaptive ability to modify and change ongoing programming is particularly important for new crisis paradigms and where there is a high degree of uncertainty about what will be most effective. Adaptive management has thus been widely recognised as highly relevant to the COVID-19 humanitarian and development response.

Sources: Rogers (2021); Obrecht (2019); Ramalingam et al. (2019); Obrecht and Bourne (2018)

For further reading on M&E practices supportive of adaptive management, see ALNAP (2016); Warner (2017); Dillon (2019).

The consequences for evaluation have been equally profound. First, how could the evaluation function remain relevant?[14] Second, how could it operate in a context where travel and meeting in person became almost impossible? Third, for some organisations, how could evaluation meet their vast scope of learning needs with a limited budget?

The result has been a wide range of RTL exercises, few of which fit the classic RTE model. Indeed, a number of organisations, including the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) and World Vision, realised that the normal requirement of launching an RTE according to a particular set of protocols and within a particular timeframe, as stipulated in their evaluation policy, was neither feasible nor appropriate for meeting the learning needs of the organisation:

‘We have a structured way of doing RTEs. [The global COVID pandemic] blew it out of the water.’

‘It required throwing the rule book out of the window.’

‘COVID made us rethink our tools.’

‘This was new territory… We needed to be more flexible in our toolbox. We were doing “in between” exercises – was it learning, or an RTE?’

‘The internal culture of what evaluations are, already ties our hands; this Real-Time Evaluation gives us more room to experiment.’

‘This period has allowed us to reflect on all our practice and how we do things. There are RTEs and the issue is… how we stretch the terms and definitions.’

There was an opportunity, and an evident need, to be creative and think 'outside the box'.

Several international NGOs launched RTL exercises – some only a few months into the response. UNICEF also launched a series of Real-Time Assessment exercises starting in July 2020, continuing throughout the rest of the year. The IFRC decided to carry out a lighter RTL exercise, beginning in April/ May 2020 to see if it was adequately responding to the needs of the wider Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Another wave of RTL initiatives came in late 2020 and early 2021, including a more comprehensive RTE launched by the IFRC, a World Food Programme (WFP) evaluation of its COVID-19 response using elements of a developmental evaluation, and the Government of Belgium's RTE of the response by its development agency, Enabel.

Almost all of these have been single-agency initiatives, with the exception of the 'Real Time Response Review' carried out by the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) in the last quarter of 2020, covering the 14 UK-based NGOs that are DEC member agencies and part of its COVID-19 appeal.

Key challenges that have arisen in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic meant that these RTL exercises differed, often substantially, from more conventional or previous humanitarian RTEs in the following ways:

▪ **The global scale of the pandemic and hence the global nature of the response.** For some organisations this has meant adapting their humanitarian programming in numerous countries worldwide simultaneously, including in many fragile contexts and countries with high pre-COVID humanitarian needs. The RTLs therefore had to be designed to look at the organisation's wider response across countries and vastly different contexts. For others, it has also meant taking the unusual step of working in high-income countries.[15] Many RTL exercises therefore have also had to be adapted to become global in scope, usually with limited budgets.

▪ **The remote nature of the RTL process** due to COVID-19 health and safety considerations for staff who were also at risk from the crisis to which they were responding. This required adapting normal RTE and Real-Time Review approaches to working online with minimal, if any, face-to-face contact. This posed a particular challenge for efforts to consult affected populations, an important aspect of most conventional RTEs.[16]

▪ **The rapid and radical shift in ways of working and programming** meant that many staff, especially frontline staff, were working under immense pressure and stress. Evaluation teams had to pay particular attention to the time availability, mental health and duty of care considerations for operational staff at all levels. This also meant adopting evaluative approaches that were light and agile, that recognised and acknowledged success, for example through appreciative inquiry, and were appropriate to context.

▪ **The comprehensive impact of the global pandemic on every aspect of an organisation's mandate, and on all its systems and functions**, has had significant implications for the potential scope of any RTL exercise, from management and leadership at the most senior level, to guidance provided to country offices, to geographic and sectoral coverage of programming, to fundraising and human resource management.

As described by one key informant:

> '…trying to design a low budget, globally inclusive learning process that would be valuable for field and global stakeholders was a creative challenge, that required using our experience with standard RTE processes and reworking to meet this new challenge.'

2.3 What is Real-Time Learning?

This paper proposes a new definition for Real-Time Learning.

Real-Time Learning is defined as a range of evaluative approaches, reviews and assessments with the purpose of understanding and articulating issues that need to be addressed in an ongoing development or humanitarian response, that can be fed back immediately into programming and management processes with the overall aim of improving the response.

Real-Time Learning offers a broad understanding of evaluative approaches to rapid feedback and learning in complex and evolving contexts. Real-Time Learning is understood to be an overarching category, covering a variety of real-time evaluative learning approaches, including RTEs, Real-Time Assessments, Real-Time Reviews, Adaptive Management Reviews and After Action Reviews (with evaluative features – see Figure 2).

Figure 2: What is Real-Time Learning?

Real-Time Learning

| Learning reviews (with short feedback loops) | • After Action Reviews • Adaptive Management Reviews |

| Real-Time evaluative approaches | • Real-Time Reviews • Real-Time Assessments |

| Real-Time Evaluations | • Single agency RTEs • Joint RTEs • Multi-country RTEs |
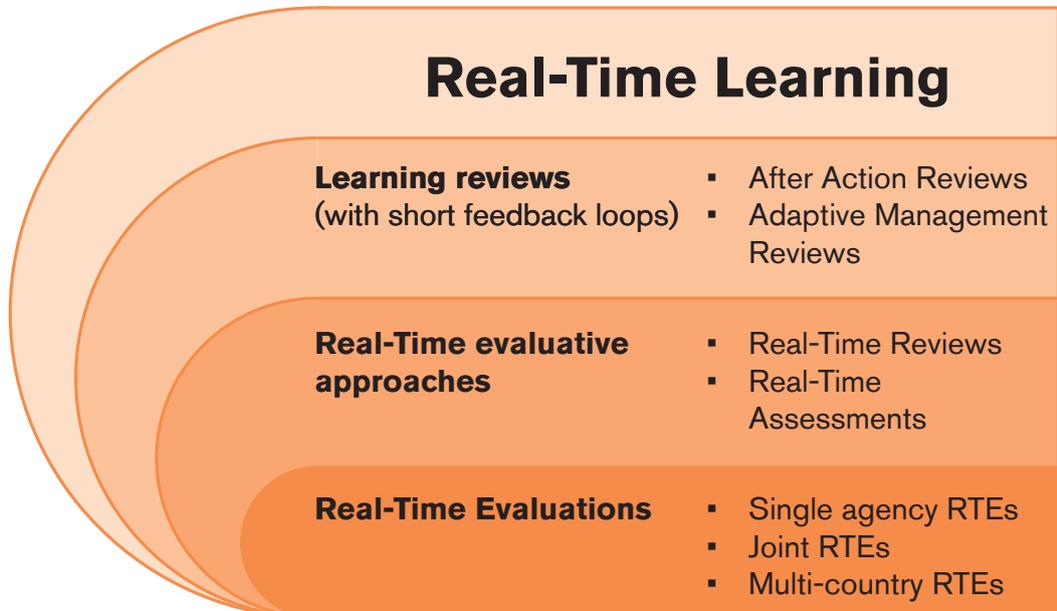
Real-Time Learning also helps capture individual staff knowledge and perspectives as well as collective team experience and reflection to inform and support wider organisational learning. In this way it serves a knowledge-sharing function within organisations, by documenting decision-making and programme learning at all levels, to inform wider organisational adaptation and change (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Real-Time Learning: from implicit individual knowledge to explicit organisational knowledge

Learning →

	Individual	Team	Organisation	
Implicit knowledge	Listen to individual voices and perspectives Request sharing of individual experience Gather ideas on how to improve	Facilitate collective reflection and learning Explore common findings and assumptions Capture decision-making processes and outcomes	Sense-check and validate findings Acknowledge diverse experience Celebrate success Identify emerging organisational or response-wide learning Facilitate change	**Explicit knowledge**

Stories and reflection | Data and information →

Real-Time Learning during COVID-19: evaluation approaches and top tips

3 Real-Time Learning during COVID-19: evaluation approaches and top tips

This section reviews the Real-Time Learning (RTL) approaches, methods and practices that different humanitarian agencies have used to inform their COVID-19 response. It is illustrated with specific examples and draws out key messages. This section is organised according to the evaluative cycle from planning and launching the RTL exercise (3.1) to implementing the RTL, and communicating and using findings (3.2). Figure 4 summarises the different phases.

3.1   Planning a Real-Time Learning exercise

3.1.1   Deciding to launch a Real-Time Learning exercise: what to consider and how to get buy-in?

Spotting the need and seizing opportunities
Many evaluation staff have described a keen interest at all levels in their organisations to learn how best to respond to COVID-19 and adapt existing humanitarian programming. Evaluation staff were able to respond to this learning demand and thus get rapid buy-in to initiate RTL exercises. For most evaluation managers the motivation was primarily to ensure that the process would be valuable for staff at multiple levels to promote learning and internal reflection.

> For a Real-Time exercise to be most effective, it is important that it is as participatory as possible and that it is conducted as a joint process with implementing actors (and partner organisations). The issue of rapid appropriation by the teams is crucial (Enabel, 2021: 1).

'Be opportunistic and grasp a learning opportunity, even in the midst of chaos.'

'We are developing a model to define what new types of evaluations could be and we are defining the expectations from the stakeholders.'

Figure 4: The Real-Time Learning process

- Identify the focus and scope
- Identify whom the exercise is intended to benefit and how to secure their buy-in
- Select the most appropriate approach to RTL
- Consider whether an internal/external/mixed team is most appropriate
- Choose learning criteria (OECD DAC, CHS or other) and approach
- Develop the analytical framework and identify questions

- Engage users in collective analysis and co-creation of recommendations
- Sense-check the emerging narrative
- Identify and be clear about information gaps/what the RTL does not cover

| Plan and launch the RTL | → | Implement the RTL | → | Analyse information and emerging learning | → | Feed learning back into decision-making |

- Consider an inception phase or workshop
- Design the methods, identifying appropriate learning approaches
- Review existing monitoring data and secondary documentation
- Collect new data/survey
- Conduct KIIs and Focus Group Discussions
- Collect external sources and secondary data

- Design a communications strategy at the outset
- Use learning processes throughout the exercise to feedback learning
- Feed the findings and recommendations into organisational processes

Ensuring organisational buy-in and clear utility to staff throughout the organisation, without overburdening them, has been more important than ever in the COVID-19 response. Many staff have worked under immense pressure, adapting and scaling up humanitarian programming while also radically changing their ways of working.

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'We were mindful that last year the main issue for the organisation was ensuring business continuity and there were many internal assessments and surveys going on already.'

Securing senior management buy-in

For RTL exercises at the global level, senior management buy-in has been key. For some organisations this has come right from the top, from the executive director (or equivalent), which sends a message to the rest of the organisation about the importance of engaging in the exercise. This may be especially important where there are difficult and uncomfortable issues to address:

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'A learning exercise for such an unprecedented response, revealing issues within [the organisation], made it clear that I needed backing from the head of the organisation. This also helped with utilisation later.'

At regional and country levels, the interest and motivation has been more variable across agencies. There have been three overriding drivers to engage: first, a genuine desire to learn about the quality of programming; second, an eagerness to learn across country programmes, knowing that many were struggling with the same challenges of responding to a global epidemic; and third, as an opportunity for views from the country office to be heard and for their experience to be acknowledged and valued, particularly at the head office level.

What to call Real-Time Learning exercises during COVID-19: What's in a name?

For some organisations and some parts of the humanitarian sector, Real-Time Evaluation (RTE) is a loaded term. A few organisations made a conscious decision not to call their RTL exercise an evaluation. In World Vision's case, the global monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) team wanted to convey that this was a slightly different exercise to their normal RTEs. Calling it RTL, they had scope to redefine this global exercise to better meet the organisation's learning needs, building on RTE experience but not constrained by the expectations of an RTE. In UNICEF's case, there was a similar rationale for calling it a 'Real-Time Assessment', to convey that this was different from RTEs. These were lighter, more learning-oriented exercises with lower expectations of robust evidence. This was important to avoid resistance to a more conventional form of 'evaluation' from staff struggling to adapt in the midst of a pandemic. UNICEF's regional evaluation advisor in East Asia and the Pacific called their Adaptive Management Review 'Learning on the go!'. This practical and action-oriented title helped to secure management buy-in from regional and country offices.

Table 2: Names used for different organisational COVID-19 Real-Time Learning exercises in 2020–2021

Name	Who used these during COVID-19
Real-Time Evaluation	Asian Development Bank, FAO, UNICEF
Real-Time Multi-Case Study Evaluation	Belgium (Enabel)
Real-Time Learning	World Vision
Real-Time Review	Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Oxfam International, Plan International, War Child
Real-Time Assessment	UNICEF
Adaptive Management Review	Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), UNICEF
After Action Review	UNICEF
Evaluation using elements of a developmental approach (with Real-Time Learning features)	WFP

Key messages from this section
- Evaluators and evaluation managers should be prepared to think 'outside the box' when designing an RTL exercise and consider 'light touch' approaches that are less demanding for overstretched programme staff.
- Consider who is intended to benefit from Real-Time Learning and ensure their buy-in from the outset, including senior management.

3.1.2 What scope for a Real-Time Learning exercise of the COVID-19 response?

The scope of RTL exercises in the COVID-19 response varies widely. Many of the early exercises in 2020 focused on agency adaptability, agility and organisational processes, to a much greater extent than usual. For some organisations (DRC, NRC and UNICEF) this became an 'Adaptive Management Review' (AMR). In other words, the evaluation function explored if and how the organisation's head office had adapted to the dramatic change in context and humanitarian need, and whether and how it had provided appropriate and adequate guidance and support to regional and country levels. UNICEF also carried out an AMR at the regional level in East Asia and the Pacific region. These AMRs are different from conventional RTEs in their focus on internal management rather than programming.

RTL exercises at the country and regional level have been more likely to look at aspects of programming – for example how existing humanitarian programming adapted its coverage and reach in response to need. The extent to which any of these RTL exercises look at the effectiveness and results of programming has been limited by the context and the lack of access in most cases to affected communities. Instead, RTL exercises during COVID-19 have been more likely to look at the extent to which accountability to communities has or has not been addressed or maintained on an ongoing basis. At the country and regional level, RTL exercises have also looked at organisational issues such as internal and external coherence, collaboration and internal ways of working, coordination and partnership issues. In other words, in keeping with the normal scope of RTEs, there has been a general focus on process issues.

A few RTL exercises have been very broad in scope, addressing organisational and management issues as well as programme issues. Oxfam International's Real-Time Review (RTR), carried out in June 2020, is a case in point. Its comprehensive Terms of Reference covered organisational and management issues such as adaptability and support from the global organisational level as well as staff welfare; aspects of programming such as assessments, targeting and community engagement, taking a sectoral approach;[17] public engagement and global influencing; appeals and fundraising.[18] As a result, Oxfam International fielded an 11-person team, the largest to date for a Real-Time Review, drawing on expertise from across the organisation.

A number of RTL exercises have played an important role in checking on staff well-being, a critical consideration in a global pandemic where staff are often living and working in very challenging conditions, struggling to meet a growing and complex humanitarian caseload. For some, this was flagged at the beginning: the DEC made it explicit there needed to be a clear focus on duty of care in its Real-Time Response Review. For other organisations this emerged as an issue near the beginning of the exercise, or as a key finding. (See, for example, Box 11.)

Key messages from this section:
- Clarify with key stakeholders what type of Real-Time Learning exercise is most needed, e.g. an Adaptive Management Review, Real-Time Learning on programming, more comprehensive and outcome-focused Real-Time Evaluation, or a mix.
- Since Real-Time Learning takes place during the course of an operational response or humanitarian crisis, when deciding on the scope of the exercise evaluation managers should consider how the human element of the humanitarian response can best be addressed, in terms of staff well-being and duty of care towards affected people as well as staff, partner organisations and evaluation team members.

3.1.3 How to adapt to the global scope of the response?

The scale and far-reaching nature of the COVID-19 response is daunting to the point of being overwhelming for a conventional RTE approach. Agencies have adapted their approaches to address this in three main ways:

- **Carrying out two parallel exercises simultaneously, to capture different perspectives:** War Child Holland, for example, commissioned a Real-Time Review to capture the 'grassroots perspective' alongside a second exercise that looked at management and coordination issues from the perspective of agency staff, including country directors and staff at the head office. Both used the same analytical framework based on the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS).

- **Layering multiple RTL exercises at different levels, over roughly the same period of time:** large organisations such as UNICEF and World Vision have adopted this approach. Although driven from the global headquarters office in World Vision's case, different RTL exercises were launched at various levels, covering distinct aspects

of the response and giving considerable leeway to regional and country offices to adapt the exercise to meet their specific needs. In UNICEF's case, first an Adaptive Management Review (AMR) was launched in the East Asia and Pacific region. This informed the global initiative to launch a Real-Time Assessment, at the same time as different RTL exercises were being carried out at regional and country levels.

- **A phased approach to RTL**: this has taken distinct forms in different organisations.

  - **The Danish Refugee Council** (DRC) launched an early global RTL exercise in June 2020, described as the 'retrospective phase', looking back at how it had scaled up and adapted its response to the crisis in the first few months, especially at headquarters level, and at lessons learned. The findings and themes emerging from the first phase informed the second phase, which was designed to capture learning as it occurred, through deep dives in four countries. This second part focused on how DRC balanced 'duty of care' with 'stay and deliver' at the country level.

  - **The Norwegian Refugee Council** (NRC) launched a global real-time Emergency Response Review between June and July 2020, focused on its Global Response Plan, to capture what was working well in terms of organisational approach and scale-up, and what needed to be adapted. In October an external evaluation was launched of the country-level response in the first year of the pandemic, from March 2020 to March 2021.[19] Although this multi-country evaluation is not 'real-time' – its overall purpose is for NRC to learn from its experience of responding to a major global crisis at the level of country offices – the evaluation is expected to contribute to organisational learning to inform current programming and identify areas for improvement.

  - **The Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC)** for the first time has adopted a process of accompaniment to support learning (and accountability) among its member agencies. This began with its unique Real-Time Response Review, carried out in seven countries within the first six months of the DEC appeal, in order to 'instigate collective reflection and draw out lessons to inform adjustments across DEC Members' responses'.[20] This will be followed with real-time initiatives and webinars to promote continued RTL, culminating in a meta-synthesis two years later to capture lessons and recommendations made throughout the humanitarian response both to promote learning and to fulfil a public accountability role. This phased process of accompaniment is intended to support learning over an extended period of time, allowing the consultants to build a strong relationship with DEC member agencies.

  - The **IFRC** launched two internal RTL exercises in April/May 2020 and October/ November 2020 (with a third planned later in 2021) to gain a quick understanding of the Movement's rapid response and whether the Federation was adequately responding to National Societies' needs through the funding prioritisation and allocation process. In addition, a major IFRC-wide evaluation was planned and launched in early 2021, to evaluate the relevance, effectiveness and coherence of the IFRC-wide COVID-19 response, centred on assistance to those affected. The RTL exercises took the form of deep dives on certain themes of particular interest to the operation at that time, to bring back quick real-time findings more rapidly than is possible in an evaluation that takes time to set up. The evaluation is more focused on outcomes to inform the ongoing COVID-19 response.

> **Key messages from this section:**
> - The timing of the Real-Time Learning exercise will, to some extent, determine its scope. Adaptive Management Reviews have been particularly appropriate in the early months of the pandemic; a greater focus on programming effectiveness and outcomes is appropriate and more feasible in later exercises.
> - An overall RTL framework at the global level can ensure some consistency and continuity, while giving regional and country offices scope to adapt to their learning needs and local context, with different options depending on the level of engagement.

3.1.4 What approach to nurture learning and buy-in?

The approach and tone adopted throughout any RTL process is a key factor to promote buy-in and create an open, safe and receptive space for learning. In Oxfam International's reflections on its Real-Time Review experiences, it notes that:

> A positive, helpful atmosphere throughout the Real-Time Review increases ownership. People can feel defensive and concerned that they are going to be blamed for things that have gone wrong. There is always a way of presenting things so that makes clear what has happened, why it has happened and what can be done to fix it. The team is more likely to open up in an open and productive environment. (Oxfam International, 2019: 4).

One way to achieve this is using 'appreciative inquiry', described as a group process that explores what is working well and how to build on that to bring about large-scale change.[21] War Child Holland approached its entire Real-Time Review as an appreciative inquiry, noting that the Real-Time Review was not a fault-finding mission, but was based on the following principles:

1. The Real-Time Review recognises the efforts made and appreciates the results achieved through the collaborative work between the country team and the rest of the organisation and partners in any given crisis setting.

2. The Real-Time Review enables (the) agency to continuously learn and improve.

3. The Real-Time Review findings help in course-correction.

Both World Vision and Oxfam International made a point of capturing and celebrating success in their Real-Time Reviews. World Vision has a summary of 'successes' and 'gaps' for each topic covered in its RTL report (World Vision, 2021). In its real-time learning fact sheets, for some topics it notes 'Sources of Pride' as well as challenges and 'what could have gone better'.

'A common theme in terms of what staff were most proud of: being there and responding to this massive event. There was a collective sense of everyone becoming a "humanitarian". People wanted to talk about it.'

Plan International's Real-Time Review also asked staff what they were proud of, generating a similar response: pride in being part of a global team and connected to one another to a much greater extent than before. Hearing, acknowledging and documenting this has yielded insights, and has also been motivating in the particularly challenging context in which staff have been working during the pandemic.

3.1.5 Evaluating against what criteria or analytical framework?

RTL exercises tend to take a more flexible approach to the use of analytical frameworks and common evaluation criteria than other approaches. The 2009 ALNAP Guide to Real-Time Evaluations of Humanitarian Action highlights which of the OECD DAC and humanitarian evaluation criteria are most useful to RTEs:

- appropriateness/relevance

- effectiveness

- connectedness/sustainability

- coverage

- coordination.

It also outlines which criteria are least appropriate:

- efficiency (difficult to assess in short lead-time RTEs)

- impact (too soon to estimate in the early stages of a response)

- coherence (a demanding criterion to assess in limited time) (Cosgrave et al., 2009).[22]

In practice, however, the OECD DAC criteria have not been the main reference point for most humanitarian RTEs. In a 2014 meta-evaluation of 44 RTEs, only a third had used them, usually selecting just a few (Krueger and Sagmeister, 2014). Very few RTL exercises of the COVID-19 response have used the OECD DAC criteria directly – possibly an even smaller proportion (see Box 5 on how the Global COVID-19 Evaluation Coalition has proposed common evaluation questions for future COVID-19 evaluations based on the OECD DAC criteria).

> **Box 5 | Global COVID-19 Evaluation Coalition and using the OECD DAC criteria and common questions for COVID-19 evaluations**
>
> In 2021 the **Global COVID-19 Evaluation Coalition** developed a set of common COVID-19 evaluation questions framed around the OECD DAC evaluation criteria. The aim was to improve the comparability of COVID-19 evaluations and to facilitate future evaluation synthesis efforts by using common evaluation questions. UN agencies, which are directly engaged in the Global COVID-19 Evaluation Coalition, have tended to make greater use of the OECD DAC evaluation criteria, and have also been more likely to adopt common COVID-19 evaluation questions across their global evaluation work (centralised and decentralised).
>
> See: COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition website

Some recent UN RTLs have used the OECD DAC evaluation criteria: WFP's evaluation, based on a development approach, used the criteria most comprehensively.[23] Some UNICEF RTL exercises at the country level also used them, for example the RTE[24] of UNICEF's response to the COVID-19 outbreak in Malawi (Arqués et al., 2021), which adopts a more conventional evaluation approach than the Real-Time Assessments that have been more oriented towards AMRs. The five UNICEF Real-Time Assessments conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean mainly looked at adaptation, effectiveness and quality of the organisation's response.

International NGOs have gravitated towards the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) on Quality and Accountability rather than the OECD DAC humanitarian evaluation criteria[25] (see Box 7). The CHS is the foundation of the DEC's accountability framework and thus the key reference point for its Real-Time Reviews. War Child Holland also used the CHS quality criteria in their entirety for its COVID-19 Real-Time Review. While some of the CHS quality criteria can be mapped directly onto the OECD DAC criteria, most obviously appropriateness and relevance, they are generally more oriented towards affected communities and people. They are also much more specific than the OECD DAC evaluation criteria, for example: Quality Criterion 5: 'Complaints are welcomed and addressed'. Another option is to combine the criteria. For instance, World Vision used both OECD DAC and CHS criteria for the Real-Time Learning of its COVID response (see Box 6).

Box 6 | Using OECD DAC criteria and CHS for Real-Time Learning

World Vision developed five humanitarian learning criteria for the RTL of its COVID response using a blend of the CHS and OECD DAC criteria (using simpler language, for example 'meeting objectives' rather than 'effectiveness'). This became:

- programme relevance
- meeting objectives
- meeting standards
- collaboration and advocacy
- internal coordination and culture.

Key informants from these organisations commented that the CHS criteria are clearer, more concrete, more operational and therefore more accessible to their programme staff than some of the OECD-DAC criteria, such as 'coherence', which may require a lot of explanation and can be variously interpreted.[26] Oxfam International has established a set of eight benchmarks for its Real-Time Reviews, some of which relate loosely to the CHS, and a number of which are adapted specifically for its own use. It used this set of benchmarks for its COVID-19 Real-Time Review.

Once again, some evaluation units and MEAL staff adapted their 'usual' frameworks for carrying out RTL exercises so they were appropriate to a global pandemic. Two themes in particular appear in many of the frameworks used: on adaptability, and 'duty of care' to staff and over staff well-being, for which the CHS Quality Criterion 8 provides a strong reference point: 'staff are supported to do their job effectively, and are treated fairly and equitably'.

Box 7 | The Nine Commitments and Quality Criteria of the CHS

1. Communities and people affected by crisis receive assistance
Quality criterion: Humanitarian response is appropriate and relevant

2. Communities and people affected by crisis have access to the humanitarian assistance they need at the right time
Quality criterion: Humanitarian response is effective and timely

3. Communities and people affected by crisis are not negatively affected and are more prepared, resilient and less at risk as a result of humanitarian action
Quality criterion: Humanitarian response strengthens local capacities and avoids negative effects

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4. Communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements, have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them

Quality criterion: Humanitarian response is based on communication, participation and feedback

5. Communities and people affected by crisis have access to safe and responsive mechanisms to handle complaints

Quality criterion: Complaints are welcomed and addressed

6. Communities and people affected by crisis receive coordinated, complementary assistance

Quality criterion: Humanitarian response is coordinated and complementary

7. Communities and people affected by crisis can expect delivery of improved assistance as organisations learn from experience and reflection

Quality criterion: Humanitarian actors continuously learn and improve

8. Communities and people affected by crisis receive the assistance they require from competent and well-managed staff and volunteers

Quality criterion: Staff are supported to do their job effectively, and are treated fairly and equitably

9. Communities and people affected by crisis can expect that the organisations assisting them are managing resources effectively, efficiently and ethically

Quality criterion: Resources are managed and used responsibly for their intended purpose

Source: CHS (2014)

As described above, many RTL exercises in the first months (or year) of the pandemic focused on adaptive management. Consultants and/or agency evaluation staff developed analytical frameworks to support and underpin this. Figure 5 shows the analytical framework used for NRC's Emergency Response Review, based on recent literature on adaptive management in the sector with an emphasis on being evidence-based.[27] This was used to structure the 'review matrix' of evaluation questions and sub-questions. As explained in the inception report:

The advantage of using this approach (as opposed to one which is structured according to the OECD DAC and other review criteria) is that it better reflects how NRC responded to COVID-19 (it 'tells the story' in a more logical way) and has the potential to be more useful in explaining how and why certain actions might have occurred, and their consequences, rather than speaking to more abstract issues (relevance, coherence etc). (Featherstone, 2020: 8)

Figure 5: Adaptive management analytical framework used for NRC's Emergency Response Review
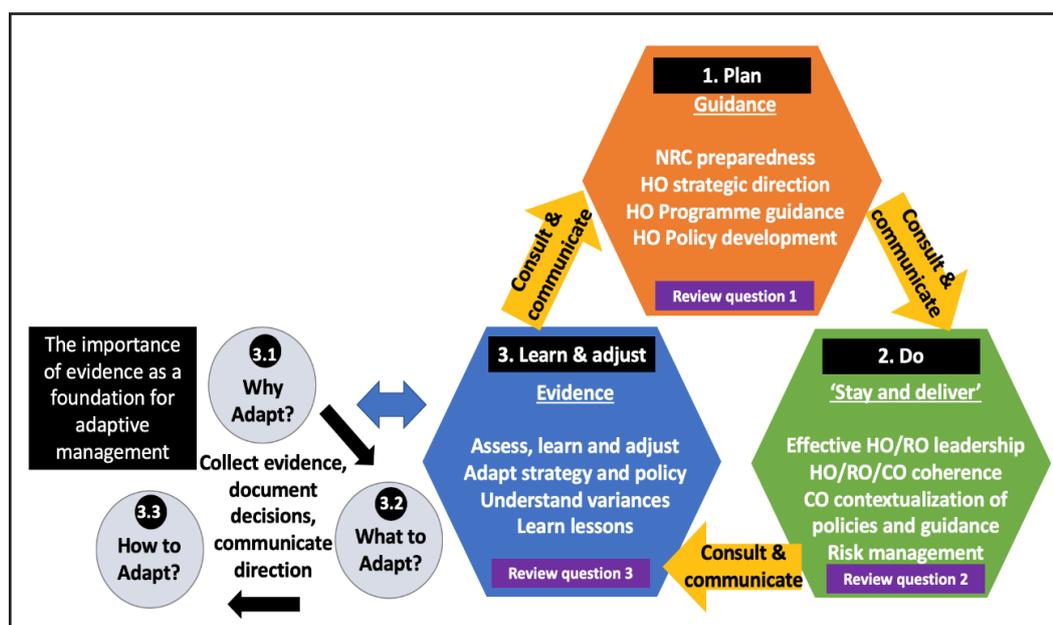
Note: HO in figure above stands for 'Head Office'; RO for 'Regional Office' and CO for 'Country Office'

Source: Featherstone (2020)

In April 2020, just a few weeks after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a pandemic, UNICEF conducted an internal Adaptive Management Review in the East Asia and Pacific region – 'Learning on the go!'. This light and remote forward-looking reflection revolved around the question: 'How can we better respond as the crisis unfolds?' A simple SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) framework was used to frame the discussion and structure the final report (UNICEF, 2020c: 2). A remote SWOT analysis using Mentimeter was introduced for UNICEF's initial real-time assessment meetings with country offices in Argentina, Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Venezuela as well as during the regional office consultation. This allowed the team to identify key issues that would then be further explored and triangulated through a survey as well as KIIs with internal and external stakeholders.

The variety of frameworks used to date implies that evaluation staff, consultants, and sometimes both together, have thought deeply about creating an appropriate set of reference points for an RTL exercise in the response to the pandemic. Although there may be hints of the OECD DAC evaluation criteria, alternative frameworks have been developed and applied. The advantage of having a common framework or standard criteria across organisations is that it enables comparisons to be made and facilitates synthesis.

> **Key messages from this section:**
> - Give thought to the most appropriate analytical framework and/or criteria for the RTL exercise to be carried out, keeping it simple and ensuring it is accessible to all staff.
> - Focusing on adaptive management principles and using the CHS standard for humanitarian organisations may be more accessible than using the OECD DAC evaluation criteria.

3.1.6   How to select questions for the RTL exercise?

Consulting on the questions to be asked

Getting the questions right is fundamental to a successful RTL exercise (see Section 6.1 of ALNAP's EHA Guide). The process for identifying the questions to be asked is an essential first step for engaging the relevant stakeholders, and to ensure buy-in for the exercise from the outset. In order to promote uptake, the key question for potential users is: What do they need to know that would make a difference in their work? This is the fundamental question underpinning utilisation-focused evaluation. An important addition for RTL exercises is: Who needs to know this?

There are many different examples of how organisations have gone about this for their RTL exercises. Five are briefly described here:

1. **IFRC** embarked on an innovative process to co-create a common set of questions for evaluating the response to COVID-19. An 'Evaluation and Research Agenda' was crowdsourced from a cross-section of the Movement. Four learning events were held in October 2020 bringing together more than 100 staff and volunteers from 63 countries. These took the form of two-hour Zoom sessions, supported and facilitated by the Presencing Institute,[28] and were designed to encourage 'generative listening and generative dialogue' through three rounds of dialogue. The large amount of data produced was reviewed and coded by two researchers. Four categories emerged, with a number of themes and evaluation questions in each category. These are intended to provide a common framework to align evaluation (and research) efforts across the movement (IFRC, 2020). At the time of writing IFRC has started to pilot this agenda at the sub-regional level.

2. **UNICEF**'s evaluation office worked with senior management and its seven regional offices to identify priority learning questions which were subsequently ranked to produce overarching questions to guide the regional and 43 country office Real-Time Assessments being launched, as well as to feed into the global synthesis report which is still being developed (see Box 8). It was then left to regional offices to customise the questions, in close consultation with regional evaluation advisors. This ensured the Real-Time Assessments met their specific learning needs, and thus built their ownership of the process.

3. **The Danish Refugee Council** (DRC) carried out scoping interviews with senior managers at the head and regional offices to identify 10 'domains of learning' to be covered by the first part of their learning exercise. These were:

   - Readiness/preparedness
   - Capacity to respond
   - Structures and decision-making
   - Internal coordination and information management
   - Business processes and support structures
   - Working modalities
   - Duty of care
   - Interaction with others
   - DRC in the humanitarian landscape
   - Global strategies and policy.

These scoping interviews also helped define a set of learning questions against the 10 domains. Questions for the second part of DRC's RTL exercise were based on the findings from the first, retrospective part. Two key questions were about striking the balance between risk reduction and duty of care to staff, and the principle of 'stay and deliver'.

'This created a lot of buy-in because staff saw their questions were included.'

4. **FAO** commissioned a stocktaking study as the first step to design an RTE of its response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The stocktaking covered the first year of the development and humanitarian response, in order to highlight key issues to be explored in the RTE. The stocktaking study was structured around the following key questions:

   a. **Immediate response** – What was the early support provided by the organisation?

   b. **Transition and recovery phase** – What is the status of the COVID-19 response and recovery programme in terms of delivery against targets and resource mobilisation?

   c. **External coordination** – How did the organisation work with other agencies?

   d. **Business continuity** - How did the organisation adjust itself to provide an immediate response and ensure programme/project delivery?

   e. **Key issues for closer examination** – What are the areas that may require further examination during the RTE?

   The stocktaking study identified both challenges and constraints in FAO's response as well as successes and achievements, to be explored further in the RTE. It proposed possible evaluation questions, building on each of the areas above (FAO, 2021 internal).

5. **Plan International** identified six areas (or domains) for learning in its Real-Time Review. These focused on how the organisation had been able to adapt and respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the first eight weeks (rather than impact of the response). These included readiness, staff safety, security and well-being to media, communication and influencing.[29] The Terms of Reference included a list of 'potential questions', and tasked the external consultants carrying out the review with refining the questions during the inception phase, based on a participatory online workshop with key stakeholders. A Reference Group was formed, comprising a diverse range of Plan International stakeholders. Consultation resulted in a slightly different articulation of learning domains (or issues, as they were called) and a set of indicators of what good practice would look like.

Key messages from this section:

- Consider using a consultative process to identify the questions the stakeholders and users of Real-Time Learning want answered. Take time to do this as it is a critical step in the process to ensure buy-in, ownership and utility of the RTL exercise. Consultation processes can be done rapidly (e.g. in online workshops of a couple of hours, if well-facilitated) when time is limited and speed is of the essence.
- In a two-phase RTL exercise, the questions for the second phase can emerge from the findings of the first.
- To support lesson sharing and collective learning, consider using the strategic evaluation framework (made up of six questions) developed by the Global COVID-19 Evaluation Coalition to guide elaboration of relevant evaluation questions.

Formulating the questions

Some organisations have chosen a few high-level questions for their RTL exercise, leaving it to the external consultants to develop these into different lines of enquiry and sub-questions. This approach follows good practice in evaluating humanitarian action.[30] Box 8 gives three examples of this approach for the COVID-19 response: from the DEC for its Real-Time Review, mainly completed in the last quarter of 2020, to generate real-time learning before the start of the Phase 2 of the appeal; from WFP for its evaluation taking place in 2021;[31] and UNICEF. Organisational adaptation features prominently in the high-level questions.

Box 8 | High-level questions for Real-Time Learning

DEC's three high-level questions for its Real-Time Learning Response Review:
1. What has been the impact of COVID-19 on DEC Member Charities (as organisations) and their operational environment (context and needs)?
2. What measures have already been taken or still need to be taken to adapt to the new working environment?
3. What lessons and innovative ideas in each country can help to prepare Phase 2, and which can be of use to DEC Member Charities more broadly, and to the DEC Secretariat in their efforts towards accountability?

Source: Grunewald et al. (2020)

WFP's four high-level questions for the evaluation of its response to COVID-19, using elements of a development approach
1. How well did WFP's enabling environment adapt to respond to the demands of the COVID-19 crisis?
2. How well has WFP adapted its organizational assets and capacities to respond to the demands of the crisis?
3. How well has WFP fulfilled its role as a partner in the collective humanitarian response, at country, regional and at global level?
4. What results have WFP's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic delivered?

Source: Terms of Reference for Evaluation of WFP's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic (2019–2020)

UNICEF's overarching questions, which were adapted by regional offices for country offices (CO)
1. How effectively is the CO implementing the response to COVID-19 so far? How is the quality of the response to COVID-19 being affected by remote working and the generally constrained operating environment?
2. How well is the CO adapting to the needs of the population, including the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic? How have these needs been determined in each country?
3. What are the early lessons (for CO/RO/HQ) that are emerging from the implementation of the response? What are the emerging positives from the response, and what have been the greatest challenges in responding to COVID-19 so far? Are there discernible trends that are applicable to different settings (i.e. urban/rural; low-resource/high-resource settings etc.)?
4. What more should be done? What should be done differently to enhance COVID-19 response programming for children and their communities?

Source: Key informant interview with Riccardo Polastro (UNICEF) based on the Terms of Reference (TOR) for UNICEF's Real-Time Assessment of UNICEF's response to COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Key informants interviewed for this review were asked which evaluation or RTL question(s) had been particularly powerful and effective in eliciting perceptive analysis. The findings are presented below. Some questions relate strongly to the learning dimension of the exercise, encouraging reflection on a particular topic, while others sought to uncover what may be uncomfortable, but important, findings (e.g. where do you think programmes might cause harm?).

Box 9 | Powerful questions

On adaptation/adaptive management
- What key adaptations were made by leadership to strategy/policy to enable the organisation to 'stay and deliver'?
- What prompted these changes (evidence, intuition, other)?
- How timely and effective were they in supporting the COVID-19 response?
- What strategic changes are still required to ensure the organisation is relevant for the future?

On the response
- How can we better respond as the crisis unfolds? (Encouraged the response to be anchored in longer-term programming.)
- Where do you think our programmes might cause harm or conflict? (This question was asked anonymously in a survey, where input from partners yielded thought-provoking insights.)

On how staff felt about the response
- What were you most proud of? (This question was asked in the RTL exercises of a number of different organisations, yielding interesting insights into what people valued in their work.)

(See Box 14 for an example of how UNICEF unpacked its high-level RTL questions into more detailed questions in an After Action Review).

Some organisations have also sought to capture key methodological lessons from recent Real-Time Evaluations. The Belgian government development agency Enabel published a paper, including recommendations for future Real-Time Learning exercises in December 2020 (Vancutsem, 2020 – see Box 10).

Box 10 | Five Real-Time Evaluation methodology and approach 'recommendations' from Enabel's Real-Time Multi-Case Study Evaluation of its COVID-19 response

1. Realistically identify the human resources and working time needed to carry out the evaluation with its objectives.
2. Increase interactions (in various forms) with implementing actors in order to fully achieve the objectives of a Real-Time Evaluation.
3. Maintain a level of flexibility in the approach.
4. Formulate together the lessons learned from the evaluation, with participation of the evaluators and the implementing actors.
5. To better prepare such a complex evaluation in advance by giving more responsibility to the (evaluation) focal points at country level.

Source: Vancutsem (2020: 12)

3.1.7   Who should carry out the Real-Time Learning exercise?

RTL exercises tend to be more varied in the composition of their teams than many conventional evaluations where it is commonplace to recruit a team of external consultants. This is particularly evident for the COVID-19 RTL exercises, where there are several examples of teams comprised entirely of staff members. Box 11 describes Oxfam International's Real-Time Review, which was carried out by a large internal team, mobilised rapidly, to ensure the organisation learned quickly from the early weeks of its global response.

Box 11 | Internal team recruited to carry out Oxfam International's COVID-19 Real-Time Review

An 11-person interdisciplinary team was assembled to carry out Oxfam International's Real-Time Review in June/July 2020, comprising staff members from across Oxfam International. This was the largest team ever mobilised by Oxfam International to carry out a Real-Time Review. It included technical specialists and expertise in gender and in global influencing. This reflected the scale of the response and the wide-ranging scope of the review. This was also in line with the organisation's 'One Programme' approach, exploring whether programmes and influencing agendas complemented and supported each other and whether business-support systems enabled this to happen effectively. Having an internal team helped to create a safe space for the organisation to reflect and learn. The team was composed in a way to ensure it was diverse, inclusive and would command respect within the organisation, headed by a highly experienced team leader. One of the advantages of conducting the Real-Time Review internally was that each team member had their own internal professional network and that the significant learning that the team gained through the process was retained within the organisation. This was important to encourage buy-in at the beginning, and to promote take-up of the learning and recommendations.

Organisations that have chosen to work with external evaluators have done so in a way that is very different to common practice in accountability-oriented evaluations. The relationship between the evaluator and the organisation's evaluation function has been much closer and more collaborative. For WFP's evaluation, using elements of a development approach meant that the usual boundaries that separate an external team from the Office of Evaluation faded, particularly between the Team Leader and the WFP Evaluation Manager who are working in close, almost daily, contact.

Both the DRC and the NRC chose to work with a single independent consultant in their respective Real-Time Reviews, in order to bring independence and impartiality when there were potentially controversial issues to be explored and reviewed. In both cases the consultant worked closely with the respective head of the MEAL function. In the DRC this started from the early stage of thinking through and designing the exercise. Because of the need to work remotely, both organisations appointed consultants who knew the organisation and were known to staff, thus having immediate credibility. This has been a common pattern across many RTL exercises of the COVID-19 response where external consultants have been employed.

'It helps if you understand the organisation, but are not in it. An external person can say some of the uncomfortable things.'

'As an external [consultant], I can be much more of a "critical friend".'

Having prior knowledge of and familiarity with the organisation has also been important for external consultants who were unable to spend the usual time building rapports. Existing relationships and experience of the organisation pre-pandemic instead helped in understanding the nature of the switch to remote ways of working.

> **'The need to build buy-in and engagement, to strengthen learning, to maximise communicative resonance, and to understand organisational dynamics require that you work in much greater proximity to members of the organisation than might normally have been the case… Being a "cold, objective outsider evaluator" might not be the best route to identify lessons and promote change.'**

> **'For a Real-Time Evaluation, it takes more time for an external consultant to know what management wants, while internal people know what kinds of gaps, and what kind of information management needs.'**

For multi-country RTL exercises, international evaluators and national evaluators must usually work together, and remotely in the COVID-19 context. This was Groupe URD's experience in conducting DEC's Real-Time Response Review. Two factors determined how well this worked: the experience and capability of the national evaluator, and the nature of the relationship between international and national evaluators. Once again, pre-existing working relationships made all the difference. In countries where Groupe URD already had a strong network of national evaluators, the blended team worked well (although the speed of recruitment required for the Real-Time Review limited the choice of national evaluators as some were unavailable at short notice). Where this network did not exist, it was more challenging. Some organisations with lengthy recruitment procedures, including some UN agencies, have experienced delays in hiring international and national consultants to launch time-sensitive RTL exercises.

Table 3 describes the advantages and disadvantages of staff members versus external consultants carrying out RTL exercises. A number of organisations decided to use a mixed RTL team comprising both external and internal team members. Frequently they recruited just one external consultant to work with an internal team. For IFRC's RTE the team leader has been recruited externally and all other team members are drawn either from the IFRC Secretariat or from National Societies. Both UNICEF and World Vision recruited an external consultant to support the evaluation office and global MEAL team respectively. At UNICEF some regions carried out a Real-Time Assessment using evaluation staff, at least one country office commissioned a consultancy company to carry out the RTE, and others opted for a mixed team, bringing in staff to work with a team of consultants where the latter had not undertaken RTEs before. In World Vision's case the external consultant supported the synthesis of its RTL and carried out some KIIs where a non-staff member would be regarded as more neutral, for example in talking to external stakeholders. Thus, a mixed team could ensure that the learning remains within the organisation, but with some

of the advantages of hiring an experienced consultant to bring some objective and external expertise, and with dedicated time for the RTL.

Table 3: Advantages and disadvantages of staff members versus external consultants carrying out a Real-Time Learning exercise

Internal staff members		External consultants	
Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
Benefit directly from learning and reflection during the RTL process, thus learning stays within the organisation	May approach learning with a less open mindset or be more hesitant to accept critical findings	Bring external expertise and a fresh perspective	Benefits they derive from reflection and learning do not remain within the organisation
Carefully selected staff who are known to, and well-respected by, other staff may be trusted and appear less threatening than external consultants	Their objectivity may be questioned, may be more subject to 'group think' and informants may feel less comfortable sharing critical feedback with their peers or colleagues, particularly if there are divisions within the organisation	More likely to provide objectivity and impartiality Outside the organisation's hierarchy/ power structure	They may not know the organisation and its culture, and therefore how to facilitate reflection and change processes
Knowledge of the organisation and its culture, e.g. of key stakeholders and how to implement organisational learning	Staff may bring organisational bias, and/or too readily accept the organisation's assumptions	May be easier to play a neutral facilitating role in staff workshops and learning exercises May be better able to articulate uncomfortable findings	They could be influenced by the need to secure future contracts and thus be less independent than they appear
May be quicker and cheaper to mobilise the team if no external contracting required	May be hard to release staff from their existing jobs for the full duration of the RTE (some RTEs have stalled for this reason)	Usually able to commit more time than staff seconded from existing jobs, e.g. if contracted to work full-time on the assignment for a period of time	May be more expensive and take more time to recruit
Conducting the RTL process in-house helps to build internal evaluation capability	May lack specialist technical expertise	Recruitment can ensure they are trained and experienced in RTL and RTEs	There is not a large pool of existing evaluation consultants with RTL experience and existing organisational knowledge

Sources: ALNAP (2016); KIIs

Whether an RTL exercise is carried out by an internal or an external team, the importance of strong interpersonal and communication skills among team members has long been recognised, in particular:

- facilitation skills, encouraging and assisting staff to reflect critically on their operation/response and to find creative solutions to any difficulties they are encountering[32]

- diplomatic skills, for example to engage busy managers and programme staff and communicate more challenging findings

- the ability to listen, of equal value to technical experience.[33]

The importance of these interpersonal skills has been amplified in RTL exercises during the pandemic, partly because of the challenges of engaging remotely and building rapport and trust online, and partly because of the extreme pressure and challenging working environments that many frontline and programme staff have experienced during the COVID-19 response.[34] Some agencies have sought to recruit external team leaders who are familiar with digital platforms and ready to work across time zones – requirements that the pandemic brought to the fore.

Key messages from this section:
- When deciding what kind of team should carry out the RTL exercise, consider the advantages and disadvantages of internal versus external team members, as well as in-house capacity and the advantages of a mixed team for the task in question and in relation to the organisation's learning culture.
- Strong working relationships pre-pandemic are a key factor for effective remote working: between external consultants and staff who are key stakeholders; and between international and national consultants in multi-country RTL exercises.
- Strong interpersonal communication skills, such as facilitation and listening, which are key to RTEs, are more important than ever in RTL exercises during the pandemic.

3.2   Implementing Real-Time Learning exercises

3.2.1   The importance of a well-designed inception phase: how to go about it?
ALNAP's EHA Guide emphasises the importance of the inception phase in all evaluations of humanitarian action, with the reminder that:

The planning process is always more important than the plan, and the team should have the opportunity to engage with the evaluation questions thoroughly in its own way.[35]

The value of an inception phase in an RTL exercise of the COVID-19 response is four-fold:

1. An inception phase is a key step to get buy-in, through engaging with the primary intended evaluation users, listening to what they want to get out of the RTL exercise, any concerns and reservations.

2. It can be used to refine the evaluation/learning questions according to those discussions with key stakeholders (see section 3.1.6).

3. It enables a preliminary review of relevant documentation to be conducted (see section 3.2.2). Restricted access to affected people and communities, and to the organisation's offices at all levels (head, regional and country office levels), means that a thorough documentation review has become even more important, to ensure the exercise is drawing on existing information sources as much as possible.[36]

4. It offers a reality check, performing an evaluability assessment and managing expectations is particularly important in the altered working context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

While this rationale applies to all evaluations of humanitarian action, the last three points are particularly pertinent for COVID-19 RTL exercises. In the words of an experienced evaluator who carried out an RTL of COVID-19 response:

'…the inception phase was essential… as a sense-check to rewrite the TOR and negotiate what was possible…, to work up an analytical framework that caught the organisation's attention and was key to getting folk on my side, to manage expectations (pulling it back to being achievable and focused), and to spell out how I would need support from different parts of the organisation'.

Even when the team is comprised entirely of staff members, some kind of inception phase is advisable. It can be much shorter than would be required for an external team. Oxfam International, for example, held an 'inception meeting' with the Real-Time Review focal point in the countries covered, to align expectations and to plan for the Real-Time Review using its benchmarks as guidance, and to agree focus areas.[37]

The challenging working environment during COVID-19 has required much greater flexibility in planning than is usually the case. Being prepared for delays and to make changes to the process at short notice has been essential.

'Allow enough time to prepare, to mitigate unforeseen circumstances… as well as always being flexible and having a plan B in the pocket.'

The inception phase is an opportunity to adjust the timing and to think about that 'plan B'.

> **Key messages from this section:**
> - Consider including an 'inception phase', however brief (e.g. it could be an inception meeting or workshop), in the RTL exercise, as an opportunity to foster buy-in, take stock and adjust the plan according to the context and feedback from key stakeholders, and commence the documentation review.
> - Use the inception phase to clarify the scope and manage expectations, for example what the RTL exercise can offer and what is not covered, as well as clarifying the time commitment expected from staff and the level of involvement and engagement from management at various stages of the RTL exercise.
> - Address any potential evaluability and ethical issues during the inception phase, for example how duty of care to key informants and to the evaluation team will be addressed during implementation of the exercise, and in the selection of methods.

3.2.2   What methods to consider?

Adapting the RTL to the context of a global pandemic

It is important for an RTL team to stay in close touch with the intended users of the findings throughout the exercise, even if this has to be remotely. The early UNHCR document on RTEs described this as 'a constant dialogue with the various actors at each location, including Headquarters: participating in relevant meetings; gathering information from them; informing them of developments and viewpoints from other areas… and comparing the responses of different entities within the organization' (Jamal and Crisp, 2002: 4). This has continued to be a core element of RTL initiatives in the COVID-19 response, but has had to take account of the fact that staff at all levels have been working under immense pressure throughout with little time to pause and reflect, especially at country office level. While RTL exercises can help with opening up a learning space, however brief, it also requires being aware of staff availability and of making demands on their time.

'It becomes a moral/integrity thing. If asking for 45 mins of staff time, we have to ensure it is not just an extractive process, rather provides something for them.'

At the same time an RTL is an opportunity for staff to share their experiences:

'People had a story they wanted to tell, at country level especially'.

And for voices to be heard at headquarters level that may otherwise be missed.

'The most rewarding and productive query… was to ask national staff for their perspective on the response. From a global, HQ-centric perspective we tend to communicate down the management line and end up getting mostly an expat perspective. But bypassing that, and going to frontline workers directly gave us a very different – if somewhat controversial – perspective on things that was very important to document and bring out in the process.'

Some frontline staff have fed back to RTL teams how much they have appreciated being consulted and listened to, especially in such a pressurised and stressful situation.

There is also usually an expectation that the RTE team should spend as much time as possible with beneficiary and local populations (Jamal and Crisp, 2002). This has been much harder to achieve in the pandemic and is explored further below.

Most RTL exercises during the COVID-19 response have adopted a multi-method approach, using a number of different data-collection methods. This section provides a brief overview of some of the methods that have been most commonly and most successfully used with tips on how to apply them. Most are qualitative, with the addition of online surveys, although the latter can be used to ask qualitative questions.[38]

Documentation review

Documentation review has traditionally played a more limited role in humanitarian RTEs, partly explained by the paucity of programme and analytical documents to review in an early-stage RTE (Cosgrave and Polastro, 2014).[39] The pattern in the RTL exercises of the COVID-19 response is different. Working remotely, RTL teams have paid much more attention to available documentation, ranging from the findings of surveys of affected communities that may have been carried out for programming and other purposes, to reviews of country office plans. There is also an ethical dimension to this: an early and thorough documentation review ensures the team conducting the RTL is well-informed before talking to, and taking up the time of, overstretched staff in KIIs and workshops. This means that the questions they ask are likely to be more focused and honed.

Semi-structured key informant interviews and group interviews

Interviews are the backbone of RTEs in the humanitarian sector. They have remained a central source of information in many RTL exercises of the COVID-19 response with a wide range of stakeholders, ranging from HQ staff to frontline programme staff, members of partner and peer organisations, government officials, and key informants at community level. They almost always use purposive sampling. Snowball sampling may be an appropriate addition whereby key informants are asked who else they would regard as a key informant and suggestions are added to the list of potential interviewees.[40]

Consultants have described the consequences of losing the interpersonal dimension of face-to-face contact, describing the pandemic reality as 'one hour fragments in a frame', losing flow, and struggling to 'get under the skin' of what is going on. But they have also expressed being pleasantly surprised at the depth of communication that can take place online, especially as this has become the de facto medium for communication and as many people have become accustomed to it.

How KIIs are carried out in an RTL exercise can vary widely, depending partly on the nature and purpose of the RTL exercise, partly on the organisational culture, and partly on the style of the RTL team. All of these factors have an impact on the formality of the interviewing process, and on how structured or open-ended the interviews become:

'RTEs are a lot about telling the story – why and how things happened. Giving people the space to talk.'

This was particularly important in the first months of the pandemic.

Indeed, the KIIs may be the first time that a staff member has had the opportunity to talk freely and frankly about their experience. If the KII is with an external consultant, this may bring the assurance that the interview is confidential and what is shared will be anonymised. This can be a highly emotional experience. Some consultants have described the therapeutic nature of the interview with some staff breaking down as they describe the stress and pressure they have experienced during the pandemic.[41] Not only does this require skilled interviewers, it may also require additional training and careful thought about how questions are framed, even the order of questioning. See Box 12 on how the evaluation team carrying out WFP's evaluation dealt with this issue. Indeed, a number of RTL exercises in different organisations have played an important role in highlighting the stress that staff are experiencing and triggering action and support in response. The evaluation team needs to anticipate and plan for this aspect from the outset, considering issues of staff well-being and mental health, confidentiality and any relevant human resource considerations that may arise, how to signpost and direct staff to appropriate institutional resources, ensuring that the evaluation team is also working in ways to support their own well-being and respecting the organisation's and the sector's principles of duty of care.

'People wanted to offload and debrief.'

Box 12 | Skilful interviewing that respects duty of care to stressed and exhausted staff members

Early on in WFP's evaluation of its COVID-19 response, the evaluation team was alerted to the high levels of stress that some staff have experienced during the pandemic and the role that KIIs were playing in giving them space to offload. The consultancy company fielding the evaluation team, Konterra, has duty of care expertise, and therefore provided training on trauma-focused interviews for the whole team. Some interview guides were scrutinised in terms of the structure and flow of questions, to establish trust and rapport early in the process, then to ensure they elicited the data and information pertinent to the evaluation, and finally to end on a positive note with a question about what that key informant was proud of.

Key informant interviews and group interviews can also be an opportunity to use a coaching approach in questioning, to encourage reflection, for example by asking:

▪ What are your main lessons from the last X weeks?

▪ What would you do differently if you were doing it again, and why?

▪ What would you encourage the organisation to do differently, and why?

Learning approaches to engage staff and partners

The range of learning approaches that Real-Time Review teams have used for the COVID-19 response varies considerably. Most important has been creating and opening up a learning space in a way that is appropriate for the group of stakeholders concerned. Thus, it may be a very short engagement with senior managers and some programme staff, and longer interaction with those staff working under less pressure.

Facilitated learning workshops are widely used in RTLs. The challenge during the pandemic has been adapting the workshop process online, for example on Zoom or MS Teams, with varying experience. One consultant described the difficulties of encouraging open discussion about challenges and things that did not go so well when conducted via Zoom. Creating a safe space and sufficient rapport remotely, especially if there is no existing relationship between the facilitator and participants, is challenging and requires careful planning and consideration. Nevertheless, learning workshops have been used effectively in RTLs of the COVID-19 response, especially at country level. Box 13 describes the approach World Vision adopted for its virtual learning-oriented workshops at country level. Box 14 describes UNICEF Thailand's **After Action Review** (AAR) workshop, held in person for all but a few who engaged online. These facilitated workshops can be particularly important for fostering learning in the knowledge that some staff will never read the report.

Box 13 | World Vision's experience of country-level workshops in its Real-Time Learning

Online workshops were conducted in 42 countries, with participants from a variety of functions working in small groups. The workshops took three to five hours. First, response roadmaps were collectively constructed, capturing milestones, achievements, obstacles and adaptations. This part of the workshop was designed to celebrate achievements and compare what had been planned with what had been accomplished. Results of the online staff and partner survey were presented to workshop participants for review and interpretation. Based on the road map and survey results, participants discussed and agreed how the World Vision Response Plan had been executed against the five evaluation categories described in Box 6. A scale from 'Very good', 'Good', 'Fair' to 'Poor' was used, to produce a visual 'Response Rubric' graph. The results of this were then used to guide discussion and the formulation of an action plan, to address gaps that had been identified under 'Poor' and 'Fair', and to push the response towards an assessment of 'Good'. The output of this process for each country office was a three- to five-page report that included three common elements: a journey map, a self-assessment rubric and an action plan. The country offices' reports were consolidated and used by regional offices and were a key component of the overall global learning process.

Source: Huddle and Dawson (2021: 24)

Box 14 | UNICEF Thailand's After Action Review workshop

This was a one-day event carried out by the UNICEF Thailand country office in August 2020, facilitated by UNICEF's regional office staff. Unusually during the pandemic, it was carried out in person. Around 40 UNICEF staff from the country office and from the East Asia and Pacific Regional Office took part, including programme, management and evaluation staff. The workshop included a panel discussion with government officers and staff from donor organisations and implementing partners. Participants fed back positively on the experience. The AAR was an expanded version of the conventional AAR approach, unpacking the four overarching AAR questions against evaluation criteria, to bring an evaluative component to the exercise, as follows:

<u>Overarching AAR Question: What did we intend (or plan) to do?</u>

Examples of detailed questions against the AAR question, and criteria:
- **Relevance:** To what extent has UNICEF Thailand's COVID-19 response been appropriate to the needs of targeted beneficiary populations, and proved able to adapt to changing contexts and needs?

- **Equity:** Given the acknowledged disproportionate impact the crisis has had on the poorest and most vulnerable children, to what extent has UNICEF been able to identify, target and reach these groups?

Overarching AAR Question: What actually happened?
This was supported by a group constructing a timeline for the response from March to the current day, using post-it notes on a wall, distinguishing between key moments that were internal to UNICEF and its partners and key moments that were external.

Examples of detailed questions against the AAR question, and criteria:
- **Effectiveness:** To what extent have the expected results been achieved in the UNICEF response, and what have been the factors that have enabled or hindered this?

Overarching AAR Question: What went well, and why?
Mentimeter was used to capture participant perspectives of strengths and weaknesses, displayed as graphs in the final report. This was followed by group discussion about the reasons for success, and enablers and barriers for areas needing improvement.
   A small number of external partners were invited by Zoom to share their reflections on UNICEF Thailand's performance.

Examples of detailed questions against the AAR question, and criteria:
- **Equity:** To what extent has the UNICEF response met the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable children?

Overarching AAR Question: What can be improved (and why), and what should we change in the coming period (and in future responses)?
Groups were organised around five or six emergent key themes, beginning with Mentimeter to start the session, followed by discussions to develop recommendations.

Source: UNICEF (2020)

The experience of other RTLs demonstrates what is possible in very short periods of time where staff have limited availability. In UNICEF's AAR in the East Africa and Pacific Region, for example, the regional evaluation adviser could set aside an hour in a regional management meeting early in the pandemic.

'It had to be super light touch because everyone was working flat out and remotely. But it was a planned moment dedicated to spark reflection and learning.'

Oxfam International's Real-Time Review team carried out 'Conversations' at the country, regional and global levels on different Real-Time Review themes, in two- to three-hour online workshops.

Reaching the affected population

Without doubt this has been the most challenging dimension of all RTL exercises undertaken during the COVID-19 response. External consultants describe their frustration at having no direct access to affected populations and evaluation managers express their concern about the inevitably partial nature of the exercise as a result. Extremely limited access means that few RTL exercises have been able to adequately address diversity, inclusion and coverage issues within the affected population, for example in terms of gender, age, disability and other factors of vulnerability.

'The public accountability aspect is important. This time around we cannot do in-depth country case studies and country visits, so we have to do this in an indirect way, to get views from affected populations. But even if we don't have direct input from affected populations we can still do the analysis in such a way to look at how it actually benefited affected populations.'

The extent to which RTL exercises conducted during COVID-19 have reached and been able to listen to affected people varies widely according to the context,[42] the local presence of the organisation and/or its national partners, the nature of existing relationships with local communities, and the communities' access to digital technology and connectivity. Ways in which RTL teams have reached affected people include the following:

1. remote data collection, including using third-party data collection (see Getting remote M&E right: ethics, challenges and gaps – Raftree, 2021)

2. national consultants conducting KIIs and focus group discussions at the community level, where possible and safe to do so, respecting COVID-19 protocols such as physical distancing and the use of face masks. This may require a number of national consultants in any one country and time to plan and carry out the consultation, with a high degree of flexibility to adjust the approach as conditions change

3. working through proxies – for example, staff and partners who are close to communities and in regular contact with them, asking for perspectives they have elicited

4. finding ways to 'piggyback' questions pertinent to the RTL exercise on other planned or ongoing consultations with affected people related to programming.

World Vision's global COVID-19 RTL was able to consult with more than 1,600 community members across six countries in September 2020, although access to the affected population varied widely between country contexts.[43] Even with this kind of coverage, the World Vision team was very aware of the limitations of their access and the data they had collected, warning against generalisable statements on community perspectives. This is a key message for RTL exercises – to be clear from the outset about the limitations in accessing the affected population and the implications.

Online surveys

Many RTL exercises conducted during COVID-19 have used online surveys, probably to a greater extent than hitherto, as a way of adapting to limited direct access to certain groups of key stakeholders. First and foremost, online surveys have been used to consult staff, at all levels and in many different locations. Many valued this because it helped ensure that a wide range of views and perspectives could be heard, and it was one source of data from which Real-Time Review teams felt they could make generalisations, where they had a high staff response rate. Second, international agencies have used online surveys to consult implementing partners. And third, some UN agencies have used online surveys for consulting government officials. The anonymity of survey responses can be particularly useful for revealing concerns and more negative feedback. Where the same questions have been asked of different stakeholder groups, comparing the findings can yield insights, for example between staff and implementing partners giving their perspective on different aspects of the response. UNICEF's Regional South Asia Real-Time Assessment used this approach, based on a scoring system. The same online survey was used in different countries in the region, thus also allowing cross-country comparisons (UNICEF, 2021b).

In some instances, online surveys have not worked so well due to increased workload, and/or survey fatigue. Feeding back survey results can incentivise respondents to engage so it feels less like an extractive process. This has been easier to do internally, for example World Vision feeding back both quantitative and qualitative results from its global staff survey, for discussion in country-level workshops with staff (see Box 13).

Occasionally RTL teams have used online surveys to reach affected people, but inevitably this is biased towards those who are more literate and digitally connected, often in urban areas (see Getting remote M&E right: ethics, challenges and gaps – Raftree, 2021).[44]

> **Key messages from this section:**
> - It is vital to be clear about who has been consulted, and the sources of information and perspectives that have fed into the RTL exercise. It is equally important to be transparent in cases where consultation with the affected population has been non-existent, or minimal and unrepresentative.
> - Adapt consultation and learning approaches to the time availability of different stakeholders, e.g. from one-hour learning and reflection sessions for senior management and overstretched frontline staff, to a full-day workshop where possible.
> - Most data-collection methods are likely to be qualitative; it is important to triangulate through different methods.
> - A Real-Time Learning exercise provides an important opportunity for staff to articulate their experiences and perspectives, which may also reveal high levels of stress and burnout.
> - RTL teams carrying out KIIs with staff who have been working under immense pressure and stress should be properly trained in how to recognise trauma and interview empathetically, with appropriate knowledge to refer staff to institutional resources and services to support their well-being.

3.2.3 How to carry out your analysis and develop recommendations?

This is an opportunity to engage users in a process of collective analysis and in formulating recommendations. This is a feature of RTEs to a much greater extent than other forms of evaluations and helps to ensure that the thinking and learning is happening among the organisation's staff and not just the RTL team.

> **'The end product as the report should not be the focus. We want to make it more about the in-country process, to make the review more learning-focused so the target audience is really engaged.'**

Various organisations have found different ways to promote collective analysis:

1. Oxfam International's Real-Time Review teams typically engage in a '**Day of Reflection**' with the respective response and country-based staff after data has been collected. Findings are shared, reviewed and validated, and action plans are then jointly developed. This process was followed, remotely, for the Real-Time Review of the COVID-19 response.

2. World Vision took a **three-tiered approach** in its global RTL to ensure there was useful data, discussions and decision-making at country, regional and global levels. Analysis of the survey results was done at the global level and sent back to country and regional levels. At the country level the findings were discussed in the workshop process described in Box 13. At the regional level, the team could decide how to use the findings that were available to them, such as holding a meeting to review the Response Rubric produced by each country office in their region as part of the analysis process. At the global level all the data and findings, including analysis from country and regional levels, were pulled together into a synthesis report.

3. For the DEC Real-Time COVID-19 Response Review the preliminary results were shared in **online meetings** with the stakeholders in the respective country so that lessons learned could be discussed and recommendations co-constructed. IFRC will similarly hold an **online findings workshop** with stakeholders once the data and information have been collected, following its regular practice of holding validation workshops for all its evaluations. Its evaluation report will be translated into at least four different languages.

4. In UNICEF's Real-Time Assessment in the Asia and Pacific region, findings, conclusions and recommendations were **validated in an all-staff meeting**. To address the recommendations a regional office adaptive management group was formed.

The extent to which an organisation wants its staff to be engaged in co-creating recommendations may depend upon its learning culture. This is now common practice in RTEs and other RTL exercises. But some organisations prefer to look to the 'external experts' (i.e. external evaluators) to advise them on what they need to change or do differently; even in this case it is important to consider how to engage users. One evaluator described a follow-up call with key stakeholders to 'get under the skin of the recommendations' that the RTL exercise had made. However, not all RTL exercises produce a set of recommendations. For example, one RTL team called their principal

findings 'learning reflections', with the intention of encouraging the organisation to do the thinking and feeding this into the organisation's strategy.

There will always be gaps and issues that it will not be possible to cover in a time-sensitive RTL exercise. This has particularly been the case during the pandemic when so much has had to be done remotely. Different organisations have dealt with this in different ways. Box 15 provides two examples, from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and from War Child Holland.

Box 15 | Dealing with gaps and inconclusive evidence

Documenting and reflecting on MSF Belgium's COVID-19 response
This internal RTL exercise, carried out by MSF's Stockholm Evaluation Unit, has a penultimate section in the report entitled 'Stating the Unsaid'. This section raises thoughts, ideas and questions that emerged during the exercise but were not fully addressed and which may deserve further exploration, for example where there was disparity between information collected in interviews and in the survey, which indicated there were issues that warranted further investigation. This section also acknowledges the voices that were not heard during the exercise.

Real-Time Review of the COVID-19 response of War Child Holland: Grassroots perspective
As the consultant had been unable to visit any project locations, she was left with a number of 'impressions' that were relevant to one of the CHS standards but for which she had been unable to gather sufficient evidence: the standard that states 'Communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements, have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them'. She included these, clearly labelled as 'impressions' in the final report (which was internal), articulating the issue or question that arose and thus indicating potential areas of follow-up for the organisation.

Evaluation guidance, including ALNAP's EHA Guide, warn against producing too many recommendations to avoid overwhelming users and increasing the likelihood that they are not given serious consideration.[45] However, evaluators also have an ethical duty to raise performance issues and propose solutions. This is particularly relevant for RTL exercises where there may be many adaptations and course corrections that can improve the overall response. Ways of dealing with this include:

- a small number of overarching recommendations, with a longer list of more detailed recommendations or actions under each headline recommendation

- addressing recommendations on particular issues to particular groups of stakeholders within the organisation, which they are more likely to assimilate. This approach was successfully applied in one organisation's global RTL exercise of its COVID-19 response, encouraging ownership and uptake across different groups, and making a long list of recommendations more acceptable and manageable.

3.2.4 How to communicate and disseminate findings to facilitate learning and take-up of recommendations?

As with all utilisation-focused evaluations it is important to have a communications strategy from the outset of an RTL exercise, especially in larger organisations where there may be numerous and large groups of stakeholders. It is also important to consider how the RTL exercise will provide information that is complementary to, and does not duplicate, existing internal exercises and learning processes, especially for large organisations that may have various internal processes to look at organisational performance or accountability such as audit functions and project level and internal evaluations and ongoing assessments. Preparing a strategy on how and when to engage users to facilitate learning and uptake should be done from the beginning.

But there is also value in being flexible and opportunistic. For example, what themes and findings emerge that could be the topic of a webinar to engage geographically disparate stakeholders? What organisational processes (e.g. planning meetings, strategy development) should the findings and recommendations be fed into? A number of evaluation managers who led COVID-19 RTL exercises in different organisations described feeding the learning into senior or global management meetings. A couple of UN evaluation units describe embedding one of their evaluation staff members into regular programme management meetings as a way to share evaluative evidence and learning on an 'as-needed' basis, and in real time.

This, of course, is a key feature of RTL exercises, communicating and disseminating the findings throughout the process rather than waiting until a final report is produced. This can be done in many different ways. Examples include:

1. WFP's evaluation (based on a developmental approach) has been designed to produce a series of short (up to 10 pages) 'evidence summaries' on different topics throughout the evaluation. Each ends with a list of issues for consideration and discussion as a prompt for the stakeholders that are gathered to review the draft evidence summary for each thematic topic.

2. One of the consultants who carried out War Child Holland's Real-Time Review ran a real-time blog which captured her ongoing thinking and analysis as she conducted interviews for the Real-Time Review. That style worked well as an engaging and accessible way of carrying staff through the learning process.

As with all evaluations, different products and different forms of communication are appropriate to different stakeholder groups. In UNICEF, for example, findings were shared and discussed at the regional level with directors and sector chiefs during regional team meetings. A synthesis report was prepared based on the regional reports, and a presentation was made to the central COVID-19 response secretariat. A separate short paper was prepared for the Board.

> **'Embed the communications strategy alongside the methodology, and think through every component of the evaluation in terms of communication so it is written into the design.'**

In the midst of a major crisis, programme staff and managers have little time to read. It is therefore important to consider more engaging forms of communication than a lengthy evaluation report. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, organisations have used varied and creative media for communicating and disseminating RTL findings. World Vision produced a number of brief thematic fact sheets, designed to be visually appealing and readily skimmed for key points, each beginning with a quote from a staff member that captures the main message of the fact sheet. MSF's Stockholm Evaluation Unit produced a one-page poster for its staff summarising key learning. The findings of Oxfam International's Real-Time Review were disseminated in a report (translated into various languages), infographics and thematic webinars. As many staff have been working remotely during the Pandemic, evaluation units have used digital means of communicating the findings of RTL exercises to a much greater extent than usual, including validation workshops described above, webinars and podcasts.[46] To encourage the uptake of recommendations, many agencies use the conventional management response. The process of engaging with users can in itself be formative.

'The final report went through an intensive process with the senior leadership team. This resulted in a management response and a clear action plan. These will be validated by our executives. And there were some things we were able to do immediately.'

Oxfam International's common practice is to produce an action plan at the end of its Real-Time Reviews which is followed up in regular response-management meetings. In some cases, this also informs a management response (Oxfam, 2019). As a variation on the management response, DEC member agencies must respond to a number of questions put to them by the DEC Secretariat in the form of a template, to show how they are assimilating the learning and recommendations from the first phase Real-Time Review for the second phase expenditure of DEC appeal funds. This practice strengthens accountability and has been described as 'super-positive for learning'.

Figure 6 summarises the success factors for RTL.

Figure 6: Success factors

Real-Time Learning success factors

✓ **Seize learning opportunities**
Identifying and grasping learning opportunities as they arise

✓ **Ensure wide buy-in**
Securing buy-in at all relevant levels

✓ **Adapt approach to fit**
Adapting the learning approach to staff availability, needs and the organisation's learning culture

✓ **Break into components**
Phasing or layering the RTL approach for a global response

✓ **Create a learning space**
Creating an open, safe and receptive learning space

✓ **Engage users early**
Engaging key stakeholders in identifying questions

✓ **Keep it focused**
Selecting a small number of high-level questions

✓ **Invest in interpersonal skills**
Ensuring RTL team has strong interpersonal communication skills

✓ **Ensure safety and ethical engagement**
Paying attention to ethical issues such as duty of care to key informants and staff

✓ **Include diverse perspectives**
Ensuring voices are heard that might otherwise be missed, for example of affected people and frontline staff

✓ **Facilitate shared learning**
Well-designed and facilitated learning workshops for key stakeholders

✓ **Build learning into the process**
Paying attention to the process more than the final report

How COVID-19 Real-Time Learning exercises have advanced learning in the sector

4   How COVID-19 Real-Time Learning exercises have advanced learning in the sector

During the first year of the COVID-19 Pandemic there was a significant shift from conventional Real-Time Evaluations (RTEs) to a much wider range of Real-Time Learning (RTL) approaches. These include Real-Time Reviews and Real-Time Assessments, which may follow a looser and/or more expansive structure than RTEs, and other forms of short or longer-term RTL exercises, Adaptive Management Reviews, and After Action Reviews. RTEs and development evaluation have still been part of the mix, but in an environment where humanitarian organisations, and especially their programme staff, have been stretched to their limits, the prospect of more conventional approaches to evaluation have not always been welcome, nor seen as appropriate to meet immediate learning needs.

Supporting the response to a global pandemic has forced evaluation units to adapt and innovate beyond their normal procedures and protocols. It has encouraged creative thinking and reflection about how any RTL exercise could really serve the organisation, especially as so many staff have been working under immense pressure with limited capacity to take on yet more work, but with a desire and need to learn and adapt rapidly. This has released a wave of creativity as a number of innovative and 'people-centred' approaches to RTL have been designed and launched.

There has been a growing realisation of the need to place the human element centre-stage in these RTL exercises. Initially and most obviously this has meant duty of care to affected people which, in order to comply with COVID-19 regulations, has meant limited direct access to affected communities. It also became apparent in the early stages of many RTL exercises that organisations had an elevated duty of care to staff. The space provided by RTL exercises revealed the stress that many staff in humanitarian agencies have been experiencing. RTL exercises have thus played an important role in drawing this to the attention of management, but have also required particularly sensitive and responsible ways of working on the part of RTL teams, especially in interviewing.

RTL exercises for the humanitarian response to a global pandemic have taught organisations about how to carry out such exercises on a large scale, which may be relevant to future large-scale humanitarian crises. Different organisations have pioneered various approaches to ensure a large-scale learning exercise is feasible, and above all useful.

- First the scale of the pandemic has encouraged focus. Rather than attempting to cover everything, identifying the big issues of concern to the organisation ensures that these are the central focus of RTL.

- Second, a phased approach ensures that the RTL exercise is both realistic and useful to the organisation. In most cases the first phase focused on organisational processes – this is where Adaptive Management Reviews can play an important part. The second phase has focused on programming, as far as possible exploring results and outcomes, to contribute RTL for programme adaptation.

- Third, layering an RTL exercise ensures it meets the different needs within the organisation while also providing some consistency. Some organisations have set the overall framework for an RTL exercise at the global level, while allowing it to be adopted and adapted at regional and country levels according to their specific learning needs and questions, as well as at head offices. This process may be completed with an overall global synthesis.

While there is a need for some consistency in approach for comparative purposes, a flexible approach has been critically important in the changing contexts of a global pandemic. For example, country offices can be offered a number of options in relation to global RTL exercises, ranging from light engagement, for example through short learning workshops, to more substantial engagement according to their programming scope, interest and capacity for RTL. While much thought and reflection have gone into the planning and adoption of RTL exercises, there has also been a lot of flexibility and 'learning by doing'. This has revealed the limitations of an overly-procedural approach, and the importance of continually asking what the organisation and its staff need from RTL in order to design an appropriate approach, allowing space for creative thinking and design.

The new RTL approaches developed during the COVID-19 response are likely to remain relevant and useful for humanitarian and development actors in the future. The renewed focus on learning, evaluative experimentation and flexibility to meet organisational learning needs bodes well for the future of humanitarian evaluation practice, adaptive management and utilisation-focused learning agendas.

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Annex 1
A brief history of Real-Time Evaluations in the humanitarian sector

History of RTEs[47]

Real-Time Evaluations (RTEs) were first introduced in response to humanitarian crises and have been promoted and used mainly by humanitarian actors across the wider international development system. The idea was first put forward by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in its 1992 evaluation of the Persian Gulf crisis, which recommended that the organisation take a more systematic approach to evaluating its response in the initial phase of the operation (Jamal and Crisp, 2002). Over the next 10 years, UNHCR in many ways pioneered the RTE approach. Some humanitarian agencies were early adopters of RTEs including the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) and Oxfam International. Groupe URD promoted iterative RTEs, with the aim of evaluating and accompanying the response as it evolves.[48]

The Inter-Agency Steering Committee (IASC) tested the RTE approach with internal teams following the 2006 Pakistan Earthquake. Independent consultants were then contracted to review the extent to which UN humanitarian reform was being implemented following major crises such as the floods in Mozambique and Pakistan in 2007, thus identifying successes and weaknesses in the multilateral humanitarian response. By 2010 the IASC had developed criteria for automatically triggering inter-agency RTEs for rapid-onset emergencies or a sudden deterioration in a protracted crisis, with additional criteria for triggering an RTE at the request of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs or the Resident Coordinator. Inter-agency RTEs were to be completed within three to six months, depending on the complexity of the crisis.[49]

Lessons from the 2010 IASC RTE of the humanitarian response to the Haiti Earthquake and the IASC RTE of the humanitarian response to the 2010 Pakistan floods became the cornerstone of the UN's Transformative Agenda as the humanitarian system had been stretched to its limit (Polastro, 2014). In 2012 there were three country-level RTEs (in Haiti, Kenya and Somalia) and one regional RTE in the Horn of Africa. The IASC adopted an iterative approach to RTEs in the wake of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti:[50] the first RTE took place three months into the response, with a follow-up RTE two years later. After this, the IASC focus switched to a more internal process of a 'Real-Time Operational Review', and eventually an 'Operational Peer Review', with greater emphasis on management and less on the results of the response (Cosgrave and Polastro, 2014).

As inter-agency interest in RTEs declined, international NGOs picked up the baton,

which broadened the practice into a wider range of Real-Time Learning (RTL) exercises. In 2013 the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), a network of 14 NGOs in the UK, began commissioning real-time response reviews within three to six months of its appeals, mainly with a focus on learning, to offer advice and make recommendations to enable changes and improvements to be made during the remainder of the relief effort.[51] Many other international NGOs followed suit. In 2017 Oxfam International moved from RTEs to Real-Time Reviews (RTR).[52] RTEs/ RTRs became one of the central pillars of Oxfam International's MEAL framework, mandatory for its larger humanitarian responses (Oxfam International, 2019). World Vision has conducted structured learning processes during its response to humanitarian crises since Hurricane Mitch in 1998, including RTEs. See Figure A1 for a timeline that illustrates the evolution of RTEs in the humanitarian sector.

According to an analysis conducted by John Cosgrave and Riccardo Polastro (2014), between 1999 and 2014, UN agencies had carried out around 45 RTEs (of which 19 were inter-agency RTEs), NGOs around 45, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement had completed 11. Donor-commissioned RTEs have historically been much less frequent, reflecting the fact that donors are rarely directly operational, although some bilateral donors, including Denmark, Norway and the Government of Belgium, have engaged in RTEs, as have the World Bank and Asian Development Bank.

The rise in popularity of RTEs in the 2000s was driven by a concern to facilitate real-time adaptive learning and to improve the use of evaluations. Herson and Mitchell (2005) described this as 'a natural corrective to an over-emphasis on ex-post evaluation', as the pendulum swung back from upwards accountability to donors to organisations' own ongoing learning. They welcomed the capacity of RTEs to support programme staff on the ground, the lynchpin of effective humanitarian assistance yet often neglected, particularly in the case of national staff. The upsurge of RTEs preceded Michael Quinn Patton's work on developmental evaluation (2011), with its focus on the need to find real-time solutions to sudden major changes or crises, appropriate to complex systems.

Existing guidance on conducting humanitarian RTEs

The first guidance note on RTEs was produced by UNHCR's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit in 2002 as 'Some Frequently Asked Questions' (Jamal and Crisp, 2002). In 2009 ALNAP produced ALNAP Guide to Real-Time Evaluations of Humanitarian Action (Cosgrave et al., 2009). This was never revised since it was superseded by ALNAP's comprehensive Evaluation of Humanitarian Action (EHA) Guide.[53] In addition, several organisations produced their own agency-specific guidance on RTEs, including UNICEF in 2019,[54] World Vision in 2012 (subsequently revised) and Oxfam International in 2011 (subsequently revised). In 2017, the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) also produced a short note on RTEs, which outlines when using an RTE is most appropriate and five common challenges (INTRAC, 2017). BetterEvaluation's Working Paper on RTEs, published at the end of 2020, provides a useful and accessible summary of the features of an RTE, how it differs from/is similar to other approaches, and when it is most likely to be appropriate (Rogers, 2020).

Most of this guidance agrees on the essential features of Real-Time Evaluation and Reviews, but in practice some RTEs have deviated from this model. This was one of the

Figure A1: Timeline of RTEs and RTLs in the humanitarian sector

1992 — First recommendation to carry out an RTE by UNHCR

1999 — First RTE commissioned by Danida of response to the Kosovo crisis

2000 — UNHCR carried out an RTE of its response to the Eritrea-Sudan emergency

2000–2010 — UNHCR pioneers RTE approach

2001 — Oxfam commissioned its first RTE

2002 — IFRC commissioned its first RTE

2009 — ALNAP publishes Real-Time Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide

2010 — Inter-agency RTEs commissioned by IASC for all major humanitarian crises

2012 — Number of IASC Inter-agency RTEs peaked, and then declined

2013 — DEC started to commission Real-Time Response Reviews for its appeals

2020/2021 — RTE practice evolves into a range of Real-Time Learning exercises to inform COVID-19 response

findings from a review of 44 RTEs conducted by Krueger and Sagmeister (2014), in which they cited examples where the terms of reference were over-ambitious, seeking solid analysis of results and impact that is unrealistic given the light and agile set-up of an RTE, or where an RTE had been launched late in the response with limited scope to influence programming, and in reality was almost the same as a conventional humanitarian evaluation (Cosgrave and Polastro, 2014; Polastro, 2011; 2014). Krueger and Sagmeister (2014) warn against the misappropriate use of RTEs, concerned that because they are the more affordable option, they may squeeze out fully fledged evaluations, although, as described in this paper, this does not appear to have been the case in relation to the COVID-19 response.

Annex 2
Key informants interviewed

Organisation	Person	Title
Humanitarian Research Initiatives Ltd	Andy Featherstone	Independent Evaluator
World Vision	Jamo Huddle	Director, MEAL, Disaster Management
UNICEF	Jane Mwangi	Evaluation Specialist
UNICEF	Riccardo Polastro	Regional Evaluation Advisor, Latin America and the Caribbean
Independent	Julia Betts	Independent Evaluator
IFRC	Miki Tsukamoto	Coordinator, Monitoring and Evaluation
DRC	Volker Huls	Global Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Adviser
DEC	Katy Bobin	Monitoring Evaluation Accountability and Learning Manager
Groupe URD	Véronique de Geoffroy	Executive Director
MSF	Linda Ohman	Head of Stockholm Evaluation Unit
NRC	Greg Gleed	Global Manager, Evaluation and Research
Oxfam International	Louise Mooney	MEAL and Knowledge Management Lead
War Child Holland	Nina Goricar	Programme Quality Manager
WFP	Andrea Cook	Director of Evaluation
Enabel (Belgium)	Giulia Camilotti, Kristina Bayingana and Audrey Mahieu	Evaluation Officer, Coordinator Internal Evaluation, Independent Evaluator
FAO	Masahiro Igarashi and Carlos Tarazona	Director of Evaluation and Senior Evaluation Officer

Endnotes

1   See, for example, the critique made by Patton (2020) of the OECD DAC evaluation criteria.

2   Cosgrave et al. (2009) (https://www.alnap.org/help-library/real-time-evaluations-of-humanitarian-action-an-alnap-guide).

3   The three-hour peer-to-peer learning workshop on evaluation strategy and planning was attended by heads of evaluation functions (or their deputies) from UN agencies, donor governments, international NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

4   As defined by ALNAP's guide on RTEs of humanitarian action.

5   Based on Herson and Mitchell (2005); Cosgrave and Polastro (2014); Krueger and Sagmeister (2014); Rogers (2020).

6   Some organisations set a deadline for carrying out an RTE. For IFRC, for example, it is within three months of the start of a humanitarian operation. For Oxfam International it is between six and eight weeks for rapid-onset humanitarian crises, and 10 to 12 weeks for a slow-onset crisis.

7   Based on Jamal and Crisp (2002).

8   They were originally described by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as a 'dynamic management tool that takes a wide angle snapshot of a situation and allows [the organisation] to assess and adjust its response' (Jamal and Crisp, 2002: 3).

9   As described by Krueger and Sagmeister (2014), quoting the writings of other evaluators.

10   Some RTEs fulfil an upward accountability function, e.g. IASC RTEs in the past.

11   See the BetterEvaluation website on developmental evaluation (www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/developmental_evaluation).

12   Based on key informant interviews (KIIs) and a review of the literature, including INTRAC (2017).

13   These challenges were all described in KIIs undertaken in preparing this paper.

14   See also Buchanan-Smith (2021).

15   Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Belgium, for example, responding to the pandemic in Belgium, through direct implementation, support, and in an advisory capacity.

16   ALNAP's Guide Real-Time Evaluations of humanitarian action describes it as 'essential that RTE teams engage in beneficiary consultation, as this is one area in which they can demonstrate that they are bringing real value to the field programme' (Cosgrave et al., 2009: 42).

17   This included public health, emergency food security and vulnerable livelihoods, cash transfers, and protection, paying attention to gender-related issues, safe programming and social accountability.

18   It also included other pillars of its humanitarian approach: a feminist approach, safe programming and local humanitarian leadership.

19   Based on a sample of countries across its four regional offices.

20   DEC Coronavirus Appeal MEAL Terms of Reference (TOR).

21   See BetterEvaluation's description of 'Appreciative Inquiry', and resources to draw upon (https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/appreciative_inquiry).

22   When the criteria were revised in December 2019, two principles were added: that the criteria should be applied thoughtfully, and that the criteria used depend on the purpose of the evaluation (https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/revised-evaluation-criteria-dec-2019.pdf).

23   Specifically, relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, impact and coherence.

24   This was one of the very few UNICEF country-level exercises called an RTE, not an Real-Time Assessment.

25   It is worth noting that the OECD DAC criteria were originally formulated for development projects, whereas the CHS was specifically for the humanitarian sector.

26   See also the forthcoming Global COVID-19 Evaluation Coalition scoping study on evaluating coherence in COVID-19 response (Drew/OECD, forthcoming).

27   Specifically drawing on Hernandez et al. (2019).

28 The Presencing Unit, linked to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston, developed Theory U as a change framework and set of methodologies to address pressing global challenges (https://www.presencing.org/aboutus).

29 As described in the Terms of Reference for its RTL review.

30 See Section 6.3 of ALNAP's EHA Guide which recommends a small number of overarching questions.

31 The Terms of Reference provide up to five sub-questions for each of these top-level or overarching questions.

32 See Herson and Mitchell (2006).

33 These last two points, as well as the ability to condense a large amount of information, are key findings from Oxfam International's review of RTRs (Oxfam International, 2020).

34 Heads of evaluation units participating in ALNAP's peer-learning workshop on evaluation strategy and planning held in February 2021, described how they have paid more attention to interpersonal communication and facilitation skills when recruiting evaluators in the past year, as well as the more conventional methodological and technical evaluation skills (Buchanan-Smith, 2021).

35 See Chapter 8 of ALNAP's EHA Guide.

36 This was emphasised by heads of evaluation functions in ALNAP's peer-learning workshop on evaluation strategy and planning (Buchanan-Smith, 2021).

37 Oxfam International Draft Terms of Reference (TOR) for Real-Time Review of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic (updated 1 June 2020 with adapted benchmark questions).

38 See ALNAP's EHA Guide as a more comprehensive reference on methods, and particularly learning-oriented methods: Section 13.7 (ALNAP, 2016).

39 Cosgrave (2014) notes that only 10 of the 103 RTEs in the dataset he reviews refer to document review, usually the larger and more complex RTEs such as IASC RTEs.

40 See Section 12.2 of ALNAP's EHA Guide.

41 Some have been living and working in extremely confined circumstances, perhaps sharing a small compound with colleagues for weeks and months in a conflict-affected environment, under pressure to scale up and adapt humanitarian programming, and unable to leave for rest and recuperation (R&R).

42 In one highly insecure conflict-affected environment a national consultant was able to conduct only one FGD with affected people in that country.

43 The global MEAL team provided guidance to country offices on how to collect data from 400 households.

44 See, for example, UNICEF's review of its 'Risk Communication and Community Engagement Initiative for COVID-19 Prevention Behaviours' in Cambodia, where phone surveys complemented an online survey, but it was still difficult to reach diverse groups, and the sample size was small for a survey of this type (UNICEF Cambodia, 2020).

45 Cosgrave et al. (2009); ALNAP (2016).

46 See Buchanan-Smith (2021).

47 This section is based largely on Cosgrave and Polastro (2014).

48 See Groupe URD's website for more information (https://www.urd.org/en/activity/evaluations/).

49 See IASC Steering Group (2011).

50 In the 10 months following the Haiti earthquake, there were 10 separate RTEs, leading to 'evaluation fatigue' on the ground (Polastro, 2014).

51 See DEC's website for more information: https://www.dec.org.uk/article/appeal-evaluations.

52 Oxfam International defines its RTRs as an internal rapid review carried out early in the response (usually between six to eight weeks after the onset of the emergency) in order to gauge effectiveness, and to adjust or correct the manner in which the response is being conducted.

53 See ALNAP's EHA Guide.

54 See Guidance and Procedural Note on Managing Real-Time Evaluations Plus (UNICEF, 2019).

Related ALNAP publications

- Getting remote M&E right: ethics, challenges and gaps
- Learning as we go: how COVID-19 is changing evaluation strategy and planning
- Evolving evaluation practice: past, present and future challenges
- Evaluation of Humanitarian Action (EHA) Guide
- ALNAP Guide to Real-Time Evaluations of Humanitarian Action

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