
SYRIA CRISIS MONITORING AND EVALUATION

PEER-LEARNING WORKSHOP

Workshop Summary Report

March 2016



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Introduction

On 15 March 2016, the Active Learning Network on Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) held a one-day meeting in Amman, Jordan for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) professionals working on the Syria crisis.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- Provide a forum for evaluators to meet their peers and share some of the challenges they are currently facing around planning, managing, evaluating and learning from the Syria response.
- Allow evaluators to seek advice and share emerging learning on how to plan, manage, and carry out monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian response in conflict settings.

The meeting was very kindly hosted by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) regional office, and was opened by the Head of the Office Helena Fraser. It was attended by 24 participants working in Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt and the UK. Seventeen organisations were represented, from the UN, Red Cross, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and academia.

Background

With the Syrian conflict in its fifth year and has so far created the largest humanitarian operation ever mounted, keeping track of the work that has been done and evaluating its impact has proven to be a major challenge. This has been made significantly more difficult by the intensity of the conflict, which has made many parts of Syria inaccessible, and by the constraints on the humanitarian system across the region.

Through the course of the crisis, ALNAP has periodically brought together M&E professionals to facilitate learning and the exchange of ideas. The first two of these learning events were hosted jointly with the UK Disasters and Emergencies Committee (DEC) and held in London. This third peer exchange was held in Jordan solely by ALNAP, but hosted by UN OCHA.

The nature of the conflict in Syria has created barriers to the humanitarian response, with agencies reluctant to share information across conflict lines because of the risks involved. This has complicated the job of monitoring and evaluating, as well as the ability to create an accurate picture of the response. Although people collaborate through formal meetings such as the information management working group (SIMAWAG), there is rarely space to share technical ideas (such as how monitoring systems are organised). In such a complex, turbulent and fast-moving crisis, it has been difficult for humanitarian professionals to find the space to exchange ideas. This peer-learning workshop was intended as such an opportunity.

Peer-to-peer exchange

The workshop used a variation of the ALNAP peer-to-peer learning exchange method, centring on the use of stories to introduce topics of interest. Four participants volunteered to discuss aspects of their work,

which were then debated by the group. Participants were asked what was good in the story, what they could learn, and to contribute ideas for improvement or where there might be gaps.

The exchange yielded an extremely rich dialogue, introducing themes such as key performance indicators for outcome monitoring, how to monitor health outcomes, M&E in smaller, practice-driven organisations and a macro view of the current regional efforts.

World Vision International (WVI) introduced the first ‘story’ outlining their new approach of using key performance indicators (KPIs) for outcome monitoring. This is done twice a year, using a couple of KPIs per outcome area (i.e. dietary diversity and frequency of meals are used for food security). The data is collected using standardised tools and sampling methods across the different countries and contexts, and is uploaded to a central database using a cloud-based system; this allows for better oversight of data quality centrally. To build on this same process, WVI uses a method to identify and report on unique crisis-affected people the programmes have reached in different areas (basically cross-referencing and attempting to reduce double counting). This approach provides WVI with statistically acceptable data that allows it to assess needs at both programme and macro level, assess contextual changes and trends over time, measure impact, set baseline and end-lines for outcome indicators for projects, and lobby at regional and global level.

International Medical Corps (IMC) has been working from Damascus since before the conflict and has been using the country’s health information system to monitor emergency indicators. Health facilities report on the same indicators using the same data sources and feed into the same system, also cloud-based. Data can be collected using platforms such as [Open Data Kit \(ODK\)](#) or a simple spreadsheet. This system is now being rolled out across the region (Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon). The system is fast and flexible, but challenges include sharing with clusters and others. IMC also collaborates with two US-based universities that help them evaluate particular programmes or outcomes.

Solidarités is a medium-sized, delivery-focused humanitarian organisation with a culture of action. Historically M&E has been left to field offices, but during the Syria Crisis they are trying to standardise their approach across the region. This has taken the form of developing monitoring plans with the offices, making sure that indicators are only included if they are relevant and serve a purpose, and working out who will do what. The country programme planning team designs the sampling, then the indicators are then uploaded to the electronic survey. Solidarités has minimal human resources for M&E, and as a result is dependent on programme staff for the work. This has advantages as it means that M&E is connected to programmes. It also maintains ‘informal’ M&E activities as these allow flexibility and for feedback to be more quickly incorporated into programming.

UNICEF leads sectors across the Syria Crisis and as a result has dedicated significant time and resources to data collection and analysis. One component of this is around assessments: under the Whole of Syria approach, UNICEF has worked on a range of assessment including [SMART](#) nutrition assessments, engaging with inter-agency assessments, and phone surveys with key informants in besieged areas. With such a mass of data from different sources, there are often challenges with analysing and fully utilising all the information. With multiple data collection channels, including for programmes serving different population groups, the sectors can end up with multiple data-gathering systems – for instance, in the countries hosting Syrian refugees, education data is gathered through separate mechanisms for refugees and host populations. In terms of analysis, UNICEF has worked with others to produce novel ways of overlaying different data sets – such as HEAT maps in Lebanon, or working with UNHCR for online data visualisation – that have helped prioritisation.

Challenges and solutions

Before the workshop, participants were asked to list the top three challenges in terms of M&E that they are currently facing in their work. These were then clustered into three main areas – quality of the data, analysis (or ‘sense making’) and informing decision making. Against each of these areas a number of sub-themes were examined in depth. This took the form of a ‘carousel’-type exercise where participants rotated among the topics spending about 20 minutes each developing solutions to each challenge. A summary of these conversations is set out below.

1. Quality

There are several significant issues that impact on the quality of M&E data. Access is a huge issue because of administrative hurdles and security constraints, and this has led to an industry in third party and remote monitoring. Trying to get beyond simple recording of inputs and outputs (measuring ‘results’ or outcomes or impact) is a perennial challenge made harder by access constraints. Donors are demanding ever higher levels of reporting and compliance as a result of the risk inherent in the lack of access, and the intense and difficult working conditions make finding and keeping skilled people a major headache. The following are some thoughts participants had on these issues:

Access: In Syria, different hubs have their own unique access constraints. From Damascus, it is government and legislative hurdles that dominate; from other hubs, constraints relate to security. In all hubs there are varying levels of remote management and therefore monitoring, with accompanying data quality issues.

Potential solutions

- Capacity building of agency staff, implementing partners and third-party monitoring staff on data collection against set standards.
- Better use of technology in aspects such as accountability to affected population and the use of common databases.
- Better sharing of data among agencies through trust-building and informal data collection processes.
- Advocate better monitoring access with authorities, for instance through seconding staff into the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.
- Peer-to-peer monitoring as an alternative to third party monitoring, possibly using joint verification teams.
- Advocate better and more appropriate use of third-party monitoring (TPM). Specifically: sharing information on the use of TPM, potential coordination of TPM firms, better dialogue with donors over their use of TPM (including limiting expectations), and encouraging the validation of TPM data.¹
- E-learning as a simple way of enhancing capacity, through offline interactive modules on specific areas or topics of M&E.
- Ensure greater inclusion of M&E staff in clusters, so that plans have measurable indicators from the outset.

Compliance: Perhaps the biggest challenge is the time-consuming nature of donor reporting requirements. Much of this stems from the fact that agencies are invariably funded by multiple donors,

¹ See for instance Sagmeister, E. and Steets, J. with Derzsi-Horvath, A. and Hennion, C. (2016) *The Use of Third Party Monitoring in Insecure Contexts: Lessons from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria*. Report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme (www.save.gppi.net).

and therefore have multiple reporting frameworks, all with slightly different metrics. Donors also have different risk thresholds and therefore different compliance regimes.

Potential solutions

- The biggest impact would be made through having a set of common indicators, based on a common results framework, alongside a set of common measurement approaches. This would require trust building between agencies and donors, and among donors. This would need to be rooted in an ongoing dialogue between technicians and decision makers.
- With a common set of indicators, advocacy could be developed for common, or harmonised, reporting templates, especially for the biggest donors (e.g. USAID, ECHO, DFID, and Sweden).
- Better coordination between NGOs on M&E would help in building the case for common M&E approaches by donors.
- Better demonstration of M&E practice by implementing agencies, and better reporting, could lead to less reliance on third party monitoring.

Results: As with most humanitarian contexts, it is far easier to measure inputs and outputs than outcomes. This is doubly complicated in the Syria context with its constrained access and multiple emergencies.

Potential solutions

- Better articulation of desired outcomes from the start in programme plans. This is challenge for both donors and agencies. Theories of change can help.
- Foster an understanding that there are numerous evaluative and learning activities other than formal evaluations. These should be considered when appropriate or possible.
- Outcome and impact evaluation requires proper budget allocation. Raising donor awareness about the costs of proper outcome and impact measurement is important. Donor harmonisation of definitions and approaches would be helpful too.
- Choose M&E methods that are suited to the programme, project or context, not just focusing on what is easiest.
- Better education of programme staff on different terms – often language does not translate perfectly. Front-line staff should understand these distinctions as they are often the ones designing and collecting data. These staff members could also be empowered to choose targets; this may help create more ownership of the data collected.
- Develop new outcome and impact-monitoring methods for populations that are moving, and can cope with fluid and fast-moving environments. Consider at what level to aggregate.
- More actively consider joint impact and outcome evaluations as these may better reflect the situation for a community and reduce costs.

People: Finding, training and retaining high-quality M&E staff is difficult in an uncertain and often challenging work environment.

Potential solutions

- Better recruitment by better targeting. Outlining minimum competencies for recruitment could help with this; this could include skills and abilities such as data collection, analysis and reporting, coordination, management, budgeting, skill development and training.
- Reducing staff turnover by: making sure people are placed properly according to skills; providing ongoing skills training and mentoring (through in-person and online means); supporting personal initiative in making progress in M&E; ensuring M&E is properly

integrated into programmes making job rewarding; rewarding particular hard-to-find skills; ensuring staff routinely interact with programmes and affected people.

- Outsourcing some M&E could be a way of tapping into expertise that isn't retained in-house.

2. Sense making

If collecting data is complex and uncertain in the Syria crisis, then analysing and making sense of the data is equally challenging. There are many inter-related aspects to this, including the fast-changing nature of the situation. One quite new challenge however, is the sheer amount of data available. This has come about because work is taking place in multiple, different contexts and because several of the affected countries are middle income, with functioning governments collecting lots of data. Conversely there are also the usual humanitarian data challenges of not enough data in certain contexts, exacerbated by a reluctance among agencies to share, and multiple systems that do not necessarily speak to each other.

Scale: How to make sense of large datasets and multiple sources?

Potential solutions

- There is a need to have M&E professionals involved in sector-level discussions about how needs are framed and data are collected. This is currently seen as a 'techy' information management role and is left to those coordination groups, rather than addressed more systematically. Solutions could involve annual reviews of indicators, dissemination strategies for users, and work on how datasets are recorded and shared (for instance using [HXL tags](#) and sharing on [HDX](#)).
- Work can be done across hubs to discuss various technical aspects: for instance, depth of datasets (Key Informant collection), different information types (assessment, monitoring, third party monitoring), and what each type is used for (i.e. local data used for triangulation).
- There is a need for greater transparency on methodology, and better use of mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative).
- There is also a need for better focus on what information is needed and how this is packaged (quarterly management reports, short trends papers).
- Initiatives like the OCHA-led joint analysis unit in Lebanon may have the resources to make better sense of overlapping and multiple data.

Harmonisation: How to make sense of data across different geographies and agencies.

Potential solutions

- Harmonise outcome monitoring between programmes and agencies: having a shared understanding.
- Harmonise analysis in the different phases of programme cycle. Harmonise methodologies to build indicators, and harmonise variables where possible (i.e. household size, non-food items, food parcels).
- Advocate to donors to agree on key indicators and key variables – also to inform external evaluation.
- Develop context-adapted M&E and analysis.
- Develop 'unique identifiers' (can be on a variety of different levels) so that common datasets can be developed, or data can be shared.
- Create a question library of forms and share these, so that people can potentially structure their enquiry to match others.

Sharing: Data sharing has been one of the main constraints to good analysis, with agencies unwilling to share detailed information on security grounds. There is also a certain amount of ‘commercial’ sensitivity.

Potential solutions

- Develop data protection/management standard operating procedures to build trust and enable agencies to share.
- Agree a code of conduct on data protection as the basis for trust building and sharing.
- Encourage agencies to develop bilateral data sharing.
- Share information on what has been or is about to be collected – an assessment registry. This could allow for coordinated surveys and data collection sharing. Transparency of methodology would also help develop basic sharing.
- Keep data sharing ‘low-scale’ and technical – share findings on an informal platform.
- Invest in quality report outputs so that even in the absence of data sharing the basic findings can be shared and trusted.
- Build on functionality of [Activity Info](#) so that it can be a two-way data flow.

3. Informing decision making

The third major M&E challenge that was identified, was how to make the data collected and analysed useful to decision makers. Too often, the implication is, decisions are made without robust evidence because people either don’t have evidence in time, or don’t trust it sufficiently. Another huge issue is how to capture input from people affected by crises in a meaningful way – so that it influences decision making rather than being ‘consultation for the sake of it’.

Timeliness: Getting the right information to decision makers in time for it to have influence. Late information can lead to a loss of credibility and missed funding opportunities.

Potential solutions

- Get the balance right between robust monitoring, evaluation and learning approaches and ‘good enough’ real-time data that can serve for programme adaptation.
- Work with partners to ensure their systems can deliver the right data for decision making.

Input from people affected by crises: This is a perennial humanitarian sector problem. Either consultation processes happen too late in the programme cycle to affect design, or there are insufficient mechanisms for crisis-affected people to influence delivery.

Potential solutions

- Prioritise and invest more in listening to crisis-affected people. Establish visible and clear voice or video and audio hotline. When possible, show results to management and donors directly (so that they hear feedback unfiltered).
- Use qualitative surveys more frequently to collect feedback on people’s satisfaction.
- Use the core humanitarian standards as a way of structuring satisfaction surveys.
- Broaden the base of third-party monitoring ‘key informants’ so that they are not overly reliant on a few voices.
- Shift from looking to individual feedback to looking at aggregate feedback.
- Increase affected people’s involvement in designing proposals and feeding back to them throughout the programme cycle.
- Learning events with the community to get more feedback about the implemented projects.
- Use monitoring data to feed into new projects.

Reliability: There are a number of common challenges to the reliability of data gathered in and for humanitarian action that have been starkly felt in the response to the Syria crisis. Operational realities and constraints can put into question the validity of data.

Potential solutions

- Emphasise the importance of transparency both in methods and assumptions.² Key informant interviews, in particular, have limitations compared to household surveys and these should be more openly acknowledged. Actions should be taken to mitigate these limitations.
- Harmonise the definitions of types of samples (for instance, geographically: what is a sub-district? What is a community, when referring to a 'community leader' as a key informant?).
- Triangulation can be challenging when agencies have little to no access e.g. besieged areas. Organisations should consider remote and technological options.³
- Security concerns should not equate to a lack of willingness to collect evidence. Organisations and staff should instead be encouraged to think creatively.

Outstanding questions from the workshop

- How do downstream partners capture information and how do we build trust/confidence in the data collected?
- Are agencies using all available sources of data (for instance, are English-speaking agencies missing out on Arabic resources)?
- How to reduce double counting when many organisations are relying on the same partners and hence the same datasets?

DISCLAIMER: This summary captures some of the key points discussed by workshop participants and as such does not necessarily reflect ALNAP's views. The workshop was facilitated by Lewis Sida. This report is not meant to provide an indication of agencies' commitments on monitoring and evaluation work planned or underway in Syria.

² See discussion in Knox-Clarke, P. and Darcy, J. (2014) *Insufficient Evidence? The quality and use of evidence in humanitarian action*. London: ALNAP.

³ See for instance Dette, R., Steets, J. and Sagmeister, E. (2016). Technologies for Monitoring in Insecure Environments: A Menu of Options. Report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme (www.save.gppi.net).