Flying Blind? Gathering and using quality information in situations of constrained access

Follow up questions

Question 1, from Holly Fisher

How did you communicate with stakeholders and partners when you got results from your monitoring system (i.e., was there an official report you shared routinely)? How often did you report findings to them?

Nic Parham, ACAPS

Yes we produced a Regional Analysis for Syria (in two parts: i) Syria and ii) Refugee-hosting countries) every month. We also produced one-off thematic and special reports such as the 'Legal status of displaced persons'; profiles of individual Syrian Governorates; 'Lessons Identified'; 'Impact of the conflict on Syrian economy and livelihoods '. We aimed to produce at least 10 special reports each year. All these products and a 'SNAP Summary of Work' report can be found on the ACAPS website https://www.acaps.org/country/syria/special-reports.

Question 2, from Helen Campbell

What proportion of the information collected in the DNU led to identification of a need for more in-depth analysis? i.e. can you identify which rows in your DNU were combined to lead to the indication that you needed to investigate that issue more?

Nic Parham, ACAPS

This is something we did not measure. All information was used in the analysis in that, when preparing a monthly report, we would filter the spreadsheet by each sector in turn and then see what information we had. Gaps were easily identified and could be investigated further. Information/data on different locations was compared and differences identified. It is only an initial step but can lead to a statement such as: Water provision is totally disrupted in area X, partially functioning in Y while there are no reports of water supply problems from area Z. So, assuming all other issues are equal: we need to confirm whether there is no problem in area Z and, if so, can say that provision of potable water is a high priority in area Z.

Equally we might filter all data for one governorate and compare different sectors or districts. Essentially this process makes it easier to spot patterns or anomalies, which is, essentially, what analysis.

Question 3, from Sophie Allen

Charles has touched on data used at community level, but do you have any examples of this data being used at government level - by national disaster management agencies, for example?

Charles Maumo, Adeso

At local government/authorities level, we have shared information on upcoming crises for them to share at national level. Information has also been shared with state level disaster management agencies. From a Somalia perspective, though they have insufficient resources, the state level DMA has been able to use the data to inform them on the appropriate response to advocate for and the actors on the ground and government at large from which they would raise funds/encourage action. We have also shared findings of our assessments to authorities at local and state level to maintain transparency, effective coordination & collaboration and efficient response.

Question 4, from Jill Tirnauer

This is a comment on security. We do a lot of third party monitoring. All three presentations hit the right notes. I do, however, want to emphasize security. In some of the places where we work, the importance of getting clearances direct or indirect from security agencies is extremely important. Not only for the questionnaires, but also for the use of technologies. Some areas where we work, we can't use smart phones or tablets. Negotiating terms is delicate as we don't necessarily know who is behind the approval process.

Charles brought up a number important points that, from our experience, need to be emphasized: working with community leaders and/or local government officials to understand security risks, to get approvals to enter areas, to make sure you are using local enumerators from the tribe/clan/area who more likely to have access to beneficiaries and sites. Before any monitoring system is in place, it is really important to understand the obstacles and potential risks to the data collection efforts overall, other activities, enumerators and beneficiaries. Thank you. These were great presentations.

Charles Maumo, Adeso

Yes, the issue of security is pertinent and I agree with these points. It is important from the outset that you have a risk assessment done of the area in which you intend to collect data whether it's routine monitoring or assessments. Your organization should have a risk matrix and security plan as part of your SOPs and also specific to project/area. Project staff should be

familiar with these documents and where necessary should have also undergone security training. The latter point also applies to enumerators. A way to mitigate risks is vetting who does the data collection. It is important for communities to entrust the data collectors with information that is often difficult to express as it touches on issues of dignity, rights and social status.

I agree, often the project and enumerators are from the area or at least the state, have a good understanding of the local context and better access.

It is also important to inform local authorities/community leaders (in areas with no official authorities) of any data collection you intend to do, who will be doing it, its objective, the target respondents and how you intend to use this data. Then inform the communities and respondents of the same. In some cases you may need to inform them of how this information can be made available to them. You will also need to gauge the preferred method that respondents would like their data to be collected and reiterate issues of confidentiality and data protection when thinking of flow of information in terms of individual/household vs a whole community/government entity.

Question 5, from Smruti Patel
How does going back to basic and remote management and third party monitoring go hand in hand?

Elias Sagmeister, GPPi
I understand back to basics as focussing on the most important, most relevant questions for programming (as opposed to collecting as much data as possible). For two case studies, we looked into what INGOs in Somalia monitor, what kind of information they collect and how the next higher level (their HQ, their donors, etc.) use this information. Somewhat to our surprise, we did not find a lot of superfluous data being collected. Generally these agencies agreed they need all the data they collect.

We did find however that if one wants to simplify data collected, it is good to start a higher level because inconsistencies there cause a lot of problems further down the monitoring chain, at field level. E.g. if donors use different age brackets, or different indicators altogether. Attempts to encourage donor harmonization as part of the Grand Bargain should be continued. There is also interesting research to inform this, such as ICVA's work on less paper and more aid or a recent study GPPi conducted on behalf of the German Foreign Office, where we recommend a harmonized donor reporting format that covers the most important questions everybody wants to know – but in a harmonized, consistent way.

TPM and different remote monitoring approaches are then simply tools to get the desired information. But the cost of getting information is often very high in access constrained contexts and the risks for those collecting data as well. So I think it is all the more important to use parsimonious templates, not too many indicators, to limit to what matters most. With TPM this is especially important. Most agencies told us that TPM works best for simple verification, much less for more elaborate data collection, let alone analysis.

Question 6, from Keith Preciados

Did you face any challenges in making the toolkit generalizable across contexts? How did you overcome them?

Elias Sagmeister, GPPi

Rather than generalizing across contexts, we try to list many individual cases from the different countries and general criteria that need to be met for each application. For example, for each technology we list criteria for when it should NOT be applied. That way, it doesn't matter whether you are in South Sudan or Afghanistan, but if the respective community is sceptical towards e.g. the use of tablets for data collection, or if your agency doesn't have the capacity to analyse data collected digitally, it's better not to use technology. Having said this, South Sudan could be considered a bit of an outlier, as it was the only country where basic technologies like phones and tablets were still foreign to many local researchers. So this will require more time. But in all other contexts, phones, smartphones, tablets, radio, are very common already. For satellites, location tracking, and more elaborate options, there are usually a few experts in the country / in aid agencies that can help with it.