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

ALNAP Webinar

How can humanitarian actors obtain accurate information in crises where their ability to access affected populations is limited? In contexts where humanitarian organisations and communities are exposed to high levels of insecurity, it can be extremely challenging to gain a good picture of needs as well as keep track of the reach and effectiveness of programming.

In this third webinar of the ALNAP Bridging the Evidence Gap series, we spoke with GPPi, ACAPS, and ADESO who are tackling the question of how to gather accurate data on needs and programming when access is constrained.

<u>Speakers</u>

AW – Alexandra Warner, Research Officer, ALNAP

ES - Elias Sagmeister, Project Manager, GPPi

CM - Charles Maumo, Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning Manager, Adeso

NP - Nic Parham, ACAPS

AW Good morning, good afternoon and good night, everyone. My name is Alexandra Warner, I'm a Research Officer for evaluation, learning and accountability here at ALNAP. Thank you for joining us today for this ALNAP webinar on gathering and using evidence in situations of constrained access. This is the third webinar in our Bridging the Evidence Gap series, this series has one broad aim. Getting past the discussions on challenges of using humanitarian data by sharing examples of how humanitarian organisations are already using evidence to inform practice. If you have missed our two previous webinars, the first one was on the use of evidence in programme planning, and the second was on the use of evidence in resource allocation. For more details, or to see the recordings, follow the link my colleague has just shared in the chat box. Our topic today is a very salient one. With the ongoing crises in Syria and Yemen, and the continuing work in contexts such as Somalia and South Sudan, humanitarians face, on a day to day basis, the challenges of constrained access. Access can be constrained where there is a high level of insecurity due to violence, or otherwise. This insecurity thus restricts humanitarians' abilities to assess needs, as well as their own performance. In this webinar, we will focus specifically on the gathering of data through needs assessments and monitoring activities, as well as how humanitarian evidence is used to inform changes in programming.

To explore this we have three very experienced practitioners for you today. Before introducing our first speaker, however, it's always useful to know how is in the room, even if it's just a virtual room, thus we're going to run a little poll which should be popping up on your screen now. So please fill that in when I go through a few quick housekeeping points. So first of all, thank you to all the participants that submitted questions beforehand, we've weaved these into the discussion already, but please keep submitting your questions throughout the conversation. To submit these, there's a question box in your webinar menu there, and we will do our best to incorporate as many questions as possible. This webinar is being recorded, the video, audio and transcript will be made available in a couple of weeks' time. We will be sharing links to further reading and resources throughout the webinar, so keep your eyes on the chat box at the very bottom of your menu there. Also, we are trying something new, we would like to hear your good practice examples in carrying out needs assessments or monitoring activities in situations of constrained access. You can share these with us via Twitter, using the hashtag #evidence crisis. So we're going to end the poll and see what we have. So we have quite a diverse audience, actually we have 80% of individuals who have chosen just a general interest through their professional capacity, and 53% that are monitoring projects themselves in these challenging contexts. So quite a nice range there.

So first off, let me introduce Nick Parham. Nick has worked for NGOs, DFID and OCHA, in both complex emergencies and natural disasters, since 1995. Nick began working for ACAPS in 2011, and set up and ran the Syria Needs Analysis Project, or SNAP, from December 2012 until June 2014. He continues to work half time for ACAPS, while also undertaking short term consultancies for NGOs and training for

United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination, and the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. Nick, over to you.

NP Thank you, Alexandra, and good afternoon, or good morning, everybody. As mentioned, I, together with a couple of colleagues from ACAPS and Map Action started SNAP, or the Syria Needs Analysis Project in December 2012, as a direct result of the lack of in depth understanding of the humanitarian consequences of the conflict. Our aim was essentially to provide independent analysis of the humanitarian needs arising from the Syrian crisis, and this was the first point I'd like to make, it wasn't to collect the best data but to provide independent analysis, and I think many of us in the humanitarian sphere often confuse data collection with analysis, and we spend far too much time on the former and too little on the latter, and indeed this was a challenge for SNAP, but due to the constraints of collecting primary data, it was enforced on us to spend more time doing analysis. Because initially we had no ability to collect primary data inside Syria. So we gathered our data, or rather, information, from as many secondary sources as possible, to provide a basis for our analysis, and we faced four main challenges with this. Back to my first slide, there was a plethora of information flying about, but this huge volume of secondary data incorporated data with a lot of bias, there was a wide variability in the reliability of sources. Very little good news was reported, and so it was in the way biased towards those areas there were in the news for the wrong reasons, and yet, and despite all of this secondary data, we never knew the full picture. It was a bit like doing a frustrating jigsaw with only half the pieces, and trying to put them all together. And then despite these many sources, we suffered from a lack of ability to triangulate the information that was coming out. Many, many of the sources were just repeating each other, a bit like news channels might run-, one news channel runs a story and everybody else picks up on it and just repeats what they've said. There was very little independent triangulation of the reports that were coming out. The third issue we came up against was just the situation, especially in early 2013-, well, all through 2013, was extremely fluid, and it wasn't until probably 2014 that the conflict began to, in a way, slow a bit, and information didn't go out of date so fast. We really lacked real time information in those early days. And then lastly, the lure of the conflict data, I call it. Whenever there's a conflict, people are naturally very, very interested in the data about the conflict. Who's fighting whom, who's taken which place, who's assaulting who, and it is the driver of the crisis, after all, but it doesn't really help us, because what we wanted to know were humanitarian needs, and we-, I think we got side tracked, and that was a great risk at the beginning, getting side tracked into, sort of, trying to discover all the little variables about the conflict itself.

So what did we do? How did we overcome this? Well, first of all, we developed a very simple spreadsheet for organising all the qualitative information that we gathered from secondary sources. We called it a DNU, a daily needs update, but effectively, every snippet of information, from anything we thought relevant for anybody's report, was copied and pasted into a box on an Excel spreadsheet, and then tagged by location, sector, population group, whether it was to do with the conflict or to do with response, or to do with a need, and again, the source document was hyperlinked, as well. And this, whilst it sounds like a lot of work, it-, by the end of our-, well, by the time I left the project in 2014, we had a team of about 12 people, I think, and we probably spent two to three man days, or person days, a week, completing the DNU. That included a trawl of the internet, and social media, news articles, and all our information we found out bilaterally, as well. So organising all that data was very important.

Next, we cultivated a range of, perhaps non-traditional sources. I mean, we started to look into social media, and monitoring that. This was, very much, the sort of looking at Facebook, inside Syria, and how valuable that was, I don't think we ever really analysed how much benefit we had, but it certainly gave us a little bit more insight into-, or feeling that we were actually tapping into Syria itself, rather than just relying on people outside Syria. We also tried to cultivate relationships with national Syrian organisations inside Syria, and then we found that the faith-based organisations, one who traditionally don't engage with the humanitarian community, even though they are undertaking humanitarian work, they were a very rich source of information, because many of them were still travelling in and out of Syria. And so we ultimately focused on cultivating these relationships with a few organisations that were active inside Syria, the key first responders, we might call them, some of the international ones, plus faith-based NGOs, and some nationals. And they became, effectively, our primary data collectors, and we would regularly meet them when they'd come back out of Syria, or debrief over Skype, or the phone, and that was a way of us getting, I suppose, primary data. But in order to do this, we discovered we had to develop an information sharing protocol. People were extremely sensitive to sharing data in conflict situations for a number of reasons, and it's our policy at ACAPS also to source all our information. If you read any of our reports, and we try to have a source after every, sort of, sentence or paragraph with a hyperlink to the source document. And that's our preferred method, to basically fully source a bit of information. But then we decided that if an agency, or an organisation, didn't want to be named, and we asked them whether we could say, 'An International NGO, a National NGO, or a UN Agency' or something like that, and some were happy with that. Others thought that might still identify them too much, so they wanted to be known just as a 'trusted source', and then occasionally we had people who said, 'No, you can't use this information. If it becomes public then, you know, it might endanger our operations or our staff,' and so we didn't actually make that information public, but we did use it to verify or discredit other information from, perhaps, less reliable sources. There was a huge amount of information that we would get, that we felt we couldn't use because it just wasn't strong enough, but if a reliable source said, 'Well actually, no, that is happening,' or, 'That makes sense because of this and that,' then we could perhaps quote the less reliable source. And just to mention, lastly, it's not on the slide, but we focused on displacement and besiegement rather than the conflict, as very much a proxy for humanitarian needs, because displacement and besiegement was more often reported, but also easier to monitor, and to find out.

So in conclusion, my third slide. We strove to have a light monitoring system, this Daily Needs Update I mentioned, to keep a watch of the whole of Syria, as well as all the refugee hosting countries, and then we retained the ability, then-, by ability, I mean the resources, and manpower, to launch a more targeted investigation, when something interesting or odd was noticed in this data. We also focused very much more on analysis rather than data collection. The data collection is laborious, and we did have to spend time developing links, but really we tried to set aside time for analysis, because it's basically that sense making process, effectively, it's analysis to find a structured, transparent and controlled human process of transforming raw data into actionable insights for decision making. So basically, we would get our monitoring system throw out something odd, which would spark a question, and we would then seek to answer that question, and that would then drive us into perhaps further detailed investigation. More investigative journalism than actually classic needs assessment. And I think that's where I'll stop at the moment. We did do a couple of primary data collection exercises, and I think I'll mention them as we get into answering some of the questions later on.

AW Thank you very much, Nick, that was very clear and extremely interesting. So, for the online audience, if you want to send any clarifying questions through, please, you can do those in the question box below, in your menu. Nick, I did want to ask you a question. Based on your work at ACAPS on the SNAP project, what is the one tip you would offer other organisations that are trying to conduct needs assessments in situations of constrained access, kind of beyond what was happening in the Syria response? If you could only give one tip, what would it be?

NP I think that would be to think hard about what primary data you really need to collect. The effort spent in collecting primary data in a conflict environment is rarely worth the outcome. Much of it is never used, or is already available, and I think we are still, as a community, hung up on this need to collect primary data, whether it's because our organisation wants to own some data, or we feel it's more valid, but I really do think that, especially in conflict situations, where it's so difficult, that make the best use you can of secondary data, really do the analysis first, and then be clear about what any primary data collection exercise will actually add to your analysis.

AW Thank you, that's very helpful indeed. So thank you, Nick. We'll move on to our next speaker, Elias Sagmeister is a Project Manager with the Global Public Policy Institute, or GPPI, as it's better known, in Berlin, focusing on monitoring and evaluation in humanitarian action and development cooperation. Elias is currently finalising a three-year research project called Secure Access in Volatile Environments, or SAVE. Before that, he completed an evaluation of partnerships between the ICRC and the national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. He was also a team member on an evaluation and review of humanitarian access strategies, commissioned by the European Commission. In January 2017, he will be joining, actually

Ground Truth Solutions, an organisation helping aid agencies to listen to crises affected people. Elias, the floor is yours.

ES Thank you very much, Alexandra. I hope you can now all see the presentation that I've just put up. Thanks, first of all, for organising this webinar, and for giving me a chance to share some findings from the SAVE research project. SAVE is a research project funded by UK DFID and implemented by GPPI, together with our partner, Humanitarian Outcomes. Over the past three years, we looked into different monitoring modalities for insecure contexts, so places where access is typically constrained. It's first off that SAVE is an applied research project, and for the part on monitoring, we worked with 18 aid agencies in four countries. In South Sudan, in Somalia, Syria and Afghanistan. Actually, Odessa was one of those partners, and others included a mix of national and international NGOs, as well as UN agencies. So we aligned the SAVE research to our partners' priorities, and the result of this is different research reports on different topics and monitoring approaches. You can find all those more specific reports on the various topics on the SAVE webpage, you can see the link in the presentation, but for this webinar I would like to focus on just a few examples of how aid agencies can monitor their programmes, despite access constraints, and how they can maintain accountability to affected populations and people affected by crisis.

So first, it's important to remember what the biggest data gaps are, and where current monitoring systems provide relatively good data already. I think most practitioners in the audience, of which I think there are some 53%, according to the poll, I think most would agree that monitoring systems are primarily geared towards donor accountability, and they are relatively good at counting outputs and showing how money was spent. Our research and our surveys also confirm this, but the M&E staff we consulted was also quite clear that current systems are not great at ensuring accountability to affected people. We also saw that aid recipients confirmed this, as this little graphic shows. They lack options to share information with aid agencies, for example, through the consultation and feedback systems currently in place. Across the four countries we covered, 85% on average, or as you can see, above 90% in some countries, say they have never been consulted about the aid they received. So monitoring systems rarely pick up some very important information coming from those communities. The criticisms we heard were quite similar across the countries. People said that only most-, only the most influential members of their communities have been consulted, they tended to be consulted at the end of projects and not during implementation, and people criticised that they rarely hear back about what happened with their complaint, or feedback. Now, for this little session here, I don't want to focus on the challenges and also won't go into additional compliance measures that many organisations have put into place, but I'd rather like to highlight a couple of good practice examples that we saw from our partners and from others, for including data from affected people, and there are a couple of, I find, really inspiring examples out there. I won't list them all, of course, but the ones, or the positive examples that we've observed in the four countries, they had a few things in common.

First, they are all inclusive in their communication. So not only relying on influential individuals. They also offer multiple communication channels. For example, the complaints referral system in Kenya, developed by Transparency International, allows communication by SMS, phone, online or in person. It includes not just aid agencies, but also relevant government authorities, for example, where this is possible. Then, many examples have systematic recording and follow up of feedback in place, thereby making sure that the information is used. So, for example, the system put in place by the Danish Refugee Council in Somalia, this one allows affected populations to provide feedback by sending SMS messages, or voice calls, like many other systems out there, but all incoming messages, the receiver responds to confirm that the feedback was received, and all the calls are logged. Then feedback is forwarded to the relevant staff. Their response, again, is also logged, and it is clear what happened to the feedback that was received. The feedback can also, then, be tracked and aggregated over time, which is quite useful, and often involves multiple levels of the agency, of DRC in this case. There was also quite strong support from all levels of the organisation, again, further helping the use of the information.

And then, the third point is that those affected by crisis often view one aid system, and are sometimes confused about which hotline to call for which project. Good practice examples take this into account, and they offer a more common, collaborative system for communication. For example, the Common Feedback Platform in Nepal, which we also describe in some detail in our report. This involves different aid organisations, media organisations. It uses surveys, hotlines, and other means to collect input, but also, for example, since we're focusing here on insecure settings, the Experience in South Sudan provides also a great example. They use fairly basic technology, radio in this case, to engage with communities, and in South Sudan, this means mounting speakers on a bicycle, and playing dedicated radio programmes to very specific audiences, for example, in protection of civilian sites, and through this, very interesting conversations become possible, allowing the monitor the context and also the performance of aid agencies, with the help of affected communities.

So there are many good examples out there for such proactive systems, not just reactive ones, and it was clear that actively asking opinions delivers much better and more relevant information, and thus makes it more likely that this information will be used to inform, or to optimise programmes later on. You can see that many of these examples are based on some type of technology, like radio or mobile phones, and overall we saw a very strong interest in the role of technologies where access is constrained. This was true in all the countries we covered, and that's why we took a closer look, and examined some of the existing options in the SAVE toolkit on technologies, which I would now like to, just briefly go through here, as well.

I should probably start with a , of course technology is not a substitute for access, and it should be really a complementary measure, especially in the examples mentioned before, it was use to complement communication, to make it more efficient, but personal, face to face interactions are of course still very important to get accurate information, and also to develop acceptance and a good rapport with communities, which then can further improve access in the long run. So some level of field access is definitely desirable, necessary. It's also necessary to ground truth the data collected with technologies. But still, technologies can offer very clear benefits for monitoring if they are used in the right way. So what is in there? First, we describe the basics, and a number of examples of how to use mobile phones, which are of course increasingly common in all countries studied. I already mentioned a few cases for collection and use of feedback. Then second, the use of digital data entry provides very promising options. One of my favourite examples is from an INGO in Afghanistan, which changed its practice from paper-based service to using tablets and ODK, in this case, an open source software for data collection, and this organisation had a lot of concerns about using tablets in Taliban controlled areas, of course, but overall the experience was quite positive, the concerns did not materialise, and it was also much cheaper compared to printing and manually entering survey responses in the database. Then second, the data collected digitally was also of higher quality, because the software doesn't allow impossible answers to be entered, like 100-year-old children, for example, and also the trust in the data increased because data can be geostamped and time stamped, making transparent where and when it was collected.

Then the toolkit also includes a section on satellites, which are rarely used, but potentially quite useful for verification of physical objects and outputs, but also for monitoring impact where this is visible from above, from the sky. I already mentioned radio, very useful in low-tech environments, such as South Sudan, and to complement feedback systems, and then there's also a chapter in the toolkit on location tracking. There are some quite interesting approaches, for example, the one developed by IRC. This approach uses smartphones and a regular office printer to print barcode stickers. So with these stickers, the software and a normal smartphone camera, one can follow deliveries across lines and borders, and track their journey. All of this is open source, so anybody can use it, and also adjust it to their needs.

And then finally, a recent addition to the toolbox concerns communication through online platforms, including also WhatsApp. This is especially common in Syria, where WhatsApp is the medium of choice for large parts of the population, including those on the move, and where as a consequence, aid agencies have started tapping into this communication, both to exchange with their own teams, and also with affected people. So, overall, there are some really useful applications out there, but we also try to explain in the toolkit that their use, of course, also creates new risks, especially in the conflict affected environments we are talking about. So it's very important to be fully conscious of those risks, and to mitigate them fully. It was wonderful, during the research, to see the innovative potential from many of our SAVE learning partners, and the useful options out there. I hope we can learn even more examples from the audience today, and from my side tis was, of course, just a very brief overview, so for more details I encourage you to get in touch with me or my colleagues, or to visit the SAVE website, as well. Thank you.

AW Thank you so much, Elias. Such an impressive research undertaking, really, and for our online audience, I would strongly recommend that you have a look at the summary report called Eyes and Ears on the Ground, it really, kind of, captures a lot of the key messages from the diversity of projects that were done under this stream. Elias, I have a few clarifying questions for you, and participants please feel free to send in more. I was wondering, how was the toolkit compiled, exactly? So how did you choose the different tools?

ES Well, we knew that the environments that we were looking at required tools that work without constant electricity supply, across large distances, and without advanced computing skills. So instead of looking at what might be possible, we looked at what is out there already, and what can be used, or at least managed, by non-experts, as well. Now, I think when using the toolkit, it's important to not start with the specific technology, but with the specific question one seeks to answer, as Nick already pointed out very clearly. Also, the specific data that is missing, that really isn't there already, because sometimes we tend to get enthusiastic and simply want to use technology for the sake of technology, but ideally one should think carefully what exact data one needs, and then hopefully the toolkit can help determine which application is the right one for this particular need, and what risks there are.

AW Great, okay, that's very clear. Also, I did want to know, this is me being a bit cheeky, but what tool in the monitoring toolkit did you find the most interesting or exciting, and why?

ES I did mentioned a few already, in the presentation, but I think the fairly basic digital data collection has, to me, the most obvious benefits, if used in the right way. So using ODK, that I mentioned, although I'm not supporting one particular software here, but there are many others such as Magpi, Mobenzi. Using these can offer really a lot of benefits in terms of the efficiency and data quality, and it could also make sharing data easier, so organisations working in consortia, or even sector-wide or country-wide, can share assessment data in a very easy and efficient way. Of course, there are all sorts of concerns about sharing data in some of these very secretive environments that we looked at, but at least technically it became a much easier endeavour, and became also much faster.

AW Actually, I have a clarifying question from Evelyn. She is asking if you could elaborate a little bit more on this safety aspect, especially in the use of tablets, and the safety of staff. So she's referring specifically to the use of technology in Afghanistan, if you could elaborate a little bit further.

ES Well, there are some cases also in this toolkit that describe how organisations dealt with potential security risks. I hesitate to give one general answer that is true for all of Afghanistan here. In our experience, and in the experience of the learning partners we had there, the risks really need to be assessed for each individual case, and they can vary, really, depending on the specific village that is being assessed, for example, or even the specific commander in charge of a specific area, and whether this particular person feels threatened by the use of technology, for example, whether this then could create risks for the person using the technology for field monitor staff. So I think it's very important to assess it in each particular context, to always think, 'Who could also have an interest in getting the data that is being collected, and who could then compromise this data from beneficiaries?' so it's not just about the risks during collection, but also risks that the data could be intercepted or stolen once it is collected. But again, I don't want to give one answer for all of Afghanistan, but we do have a few steps in the toolkit that can be taken to assess the risks in a particular situation.

AW Thank you, Elias, that was very clear. Now, for our final speaker, Charles Maumo has over 12 years of experience in monitoring and evaluating in development, emergency and post-emergency context. In the past, Charles has worked with the Somalia Cash Consortium, Save the Children International, Children in Christ International, SAVE, World Vision International, among others. Currently, Charles is the Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning Manager for Adeso, formerly known as Foreign Relief, which is a humanitarian and development organisation. Adeso works in Somalia, arid and semi-arid regions of Kenya, and South Sudan. As, as Elias mentioned, very interestingly, Adeso participated in the SAVE research. Charles, the floor is yours.

CM Good morning, good evening and good night to the participants, and this. As we have just gone through the whole access-, basically learning more about accessing hard to reach areas, I am going to go through about what Adeso is doing, basically what we have been going through, and what we have done to access hard to reach areas since 2011, the time I joined Adeso, and basically what we have tried to do and how we have done-, how we have done our monitoring and evaluation, accountability and learning activities in these areas. First, I'll take you through the background. Basically, our monitoring is in tracking the changes of the programme performance over the entire period of the project, and where the need is there, monitoring using new technologies. I'm talking about mobile phones, biometric scanning, and sometimes borrowing other skills from other actors that are working in the same regions, such as UNFAO, whereby they are coming in with some new technologies, and, like satellite scanning, and including-, there's an agency that is being run by UN called Famine Early Warning System Network, basically that deals with satellite scanning. Before 2011, would ban agencies who are using new technology. That's mobile phones, GPS receivers, they were purported as spies, hence being banned from-, especially in south and central Somalia, so those agencies would move out and some of the staff would be attacked, and this is something that even Adeso went through in a few areas. But that made us go in and do some research, basically find out why and how we can access these areas, because the communities are in need.

The downside was many agencies will do assessment, basically how they can go in and-, basically how they can access the areas, but they wouldn't share the reports that they developed, so what we did is we came up with a strategy, and with the help of the UN, that's UN OCHA, the cluster system whereby agencies will come in and share information through the cluster system. So each and every agency that does some needs assessment will, through the cluster, share information of what they found out. Why certain areas are not accessible, and how we can access those areas. As security risks remain high, agencies like Adeso, we have resorted to standard and temporary approach of data gathering, that is remotely. So through remote management, we have tried to get data that we have needed, but it has somehow been difficult. So we had to come up with a variety of ways how we can access those areas and get credible data.

How have we done this, to reduce the risk to our staff and the communities that we are serving, and gather credible data? First, because we realised most of the attacks, or those who were most at risk were international staff in the field areas. So what we resorted to is restricting movement and sometimes completely withdrawing international staff, and taking this responsibility back to the local staff, who we would train intensively to help with data collection. It's an expensive affair, but this is something that we resorted to because we want to get credible data. The second, we invested heavily in outreach teams. These are community mobilisers. Our projects will have as many as we could afford. Basically the work of these outreach teams is spreading the word about what the agency is doing, how the communities can help Adeso, and making sure that at least the interventions that we are providing reaches the most vulnerable, those who we usually target. The other bit that we are doing is carrying out regular local consultations. This is by forming what we are calling VRCs, Village Relief Committees. These are voluntary, knowledgeable and opinion leaders in the community, who are able to help carry out the interventions of the organisation, and these are the people who the agency would always call, or access, each and every time. Basically they're the people that are bridging the gap between the community and the agency. These are the people that we-, who will tell us when it's safe to go in an area and collect data, and when not to, and sometimes safe is not only about-, or accessibility is not about only attacks from Al-Shabab, or those groups, but it would be because of impassable roads. It may be because of flooding, or because of families, or families or communities have moved because of drought. These are the people who will tell us where to go, where the communities have moved to, or where these guys are attacking, or where we should not move to.

The other bit is we formed strategic partnerships with local agencies. Here, I mean, local partners, with civil society organisations who are part of it, part of the community, and they've been working in the communities more than we have been doing. So what we do is after them, we go in and train them extensively, so that at least they can have the knowledge and know exactly what we are looking for, and go through the tools with them, dry run with them, and at least leave them with the mind of collecting the kind of data that we, as staff of the agency, will collect.

In some areas we have done local broadcasting, whereby through the media, in those regions, we have gone in and broadcasted what we are doing, and letting the community feel that they are part of the intervention, even those who are not beneficiaries. So at the end of the broadcast, we tell them, 'This is the channel of communication if you want to reach agency staff, and if you want to get any information passed about the community, about the intervention that we are providing, this is the channel,' and that has worked most of the time, because they have SMS and they have called in, and sometimes some have popped in to our field offices, and provided information that has been useful to our programme. And for community buy-in, basically when we go into these communities, especially when we are doing a cash transfer programme, what we do is sign MOUs with community groups, whereby they co-own the project, in that in case anything happens, it's-, it's the liability that's taken by the community, it's something that they co-own. So the community form groups, and they sign MOUs with the agency, they are trained how to run the project, and make sure that in case of any issue that arises, basically, they inform the agency.

The other bit is about diversification of staff, and building capacity of these local staff. We work in different communities, and in Somalia, they are different clans, and clannism is a big issue in Somalia. So what you do is make sure-, what we are doing is we make sure that at least we not only select, or bring staff on board from the same-, from one community, or one clan, but diversify, so that each and every community can buy in to the project, and make sure that at least they don't-, they don't bring certain issues to do with-, basically security issues, or they don't buy in to the project. And that has helped us locate those hard to access areas and collect data, because staff-, the staff from those clans have been involved, or are part of our group. Through gatekeepers, especially in IDP settings, we have managed to get, or get in those areas that have been hard to access for many agencies. Through these gatekeepers, because we've been working in these areas for long, they have become like friends of the agency, and we, each and every time, keep them updated of what we are doing in relation to programming, in those areas. So they have become friends of the agency, most of the time they don't agree with our targeting criteria, but at the end of the day, after explanation of why we are targeting the vulnerable, and about our A-Z of criteria, they came and right now they are agreeing, although not fully, but partly, with our intervention. Most of the time, we usually do third party monitoring. Basically, to help us collect, monitor and-, monitor the progress of the project and collect data on our behalf in those hard to reach areas. Now, those areas that-, the method that I have just mentioned is not able to help us access, but these-, through third party monitors with somehow local agencies that have their own staff in those hard to access areas, they are able to make sure that data is collected, the right data, the right quality data, and the kind of information that we need is brought into fruition.

Most of the time, and initially we did use feedback and accountability system to get only feedback, which is complaints and compliments from the beneficiaries in the field, but we recently realised after the SAVE project that this is also a good medium to get or gather data. So we have employed this system to gather data from the field, not only on our beneficiaries, but even early warning signs and data to do with our programme. Basically, we go in and ask questions more about what we-, what the community is going through and how they should come in and help us get, or gather data that is so useful to our next programme.

We have tried to embrace new technology in our systems, and gathering the data. Right now, in the field, in those areas that we have our staff, that our international staff at HQ can't access, we are utilising online data management, and including remote sensing, biometric scanning, mobile data collection. So this has also helped us get that real time data in our HQ. The techniques that we are using-,

AW Thank you Charles-, Charles, I'm sorry, we'll move on to the discussion, actually, if that's alright. I'll save this slide for a little bit later if we can come back to it during the discussion period. I did have a really-, a question come in from the audience, wondering, you mentioned it just now, how you were involved in the SAVE research and some of the improvements you made based on this participation, but could you elaborate a little bit more on some of the learnings that you absorbed, and how that's changed the way you work at Adeso?

CM Okay, thank you. I think from the SAVE project, we have learnt a lot, and one of the things that we did learn is about going back to basics, and by going back to basics is-, we've always been engaged in learning more and utilisation of new technology, but we didn't realise there are those areas that still-, where we are collecting the data, the communities have not embraced the technology. Like, someone you are interviewing, a community member, most of the time, you have a phone. The person is always-, is always not giving you answers that you need, or the answers as they should be, but is more concerned about utilisation of the phone, basically making an assumption that at least that phone-, that phone somehow is making him or her uncomfortable. So in some areas, what we have done, like, in conducting some needs assessment, we have gone back and started going back to the pen and paper way, and that one, at least, they have been used to that, and at least it's giving us data and at least it's not something that is providing some security issues. In some instances, we were-, as we were using the mobile phone, one community member has told us, 'Here we are not allowed to speak to NGOs who are using mobile phones, so will you just go back and come back later? Or you can call me at night and I can give information.'

AW That's very clear, thank you. Thank you very much, Charles. So we are going to open it up now for discussion, so if the online audience wants to send through their questions, we do have a few that have come in already, so I will try and incorporate those into the conversation as much as possible. Also, remember that you can share your good practice examples in carrying out needs assessments and monitoring activities in situations of constrained access via Twitter, using the hashtag #evidencecrisis. Thank you again, Charles, Elias and Nick. So I should mention that this series, our webinar series, builds on the work of ALNAP that we did back in 2013 on evidence in humanitarian action. We established six criteria for evidence quality, so accuracy, representativeness, relevance, generalisability, attribution, as well as clarity around context and methods. My colleague should be sharing the report with you right now in the chat box there. So I wanted to ask the panellists, in your experience, are there evidence quality criteria that are more likely to fall to the wayside in the contexts that we've been discussing? Which ones, and what measures can organisations take, without breaking the bank, very important, to mediate these criteria falling off? Nick, would you like to go first?

NP Okay, I think, yes, these-, well, I think the key for me is really that representativeness, I mean with looking at what we did in Syria, where none of our assessments, or even our primary data collection could be said to be representative, and very little could be generalised, but I think, you know, if we take what we've got, and we look at making sure that we can rely, as I said, we look at specific reliable sources, we source, or we find those that we consider to be reliable, and we actively seek to triangulate our data, tracing as far back to the original source as we can, and then we are constantly interrogating the data, and we're playing devil's advocate, and we're trying to understand, you know, what could this data be telling us? Could-, you know, if we think it, in the context, should be saying this, somebody else would try and fight against that, to sort of, yes, play devil's advocate, try and undermine the arguments. To really make sure that, you know, what little evidence we have is-, is being used in a way as accurately as we can, to make sure we are only saying what we can say from it, and then to work out what the limits of that data are. You know, how far can we extrapolate it, you know. If it's something to do with the health system or the access to water, you know, we've got to say very specifically about one particular area, if that's the data we have, but then from what we know about the rest of the context, can we then make an inference as to what it will be like in another area? Whether it'll be a priority need there, and do we have any other evidence to support that? So I think, you know, we would look to work with our-, with what we have, and just be really clear in how we-, what we reported, and make it clear what it's-, you know, what it could be used for.

AW Thank you, Nick. Elias, what do you think?

ES I think Nick said it all, pretty much. Especially on how to deal with the lack of representativeness, because I also think that's the most difficult one, probably, in areas where you cannot do proper sampling, where you sort of have to take what you can get, and then as a consequence you get all sorts of geographic biases, biases depending on the segment of the population that you can reach, depending on the access situation. So maybe just one thing to add would be that also comparing data with the information that other peer organisations have can of course also help to judge how representative one's own data is, and I realise in most conflict affected environments, agencies are wary of sharing data, but to me it seems promising and important to create fora, or create protected spaces where agencies can exchange about the data that they have to also see whether it is representative, or is it only the part of the jigsaw that only we see, and then maybe other peer organisations see a different part.

AW Thank you Elias, that's very clear and helpful. Charles, a slightly different question, if I may. One of our participants asked specifically, how can organisations achieve representativeness in their data collection? How do we know that we have the full picture?

CM Thank you. I think the question is in twofold about representativeness, which touches on sampling, and the full picture, which touches on the methodology. I think bringing these two into, organisations-, what organisations can do first of all is by utilisation of scientific methods in their sampling, and by scientific methods, I mean those following the criteria as outlined by those formulations, and making sure the nitty gritty is taken care of. Basically, looking at the confidence interval, the population that one wants to assess, and also checking on the margin of error, to get you a representative sample. Because these methodologies have been utilised, have been tested, proven, and they have worked in many scenarios, if not all, and they are specified on where and when to use them, including the population to be used on. The other bit is in the sampling, it's better to also make the stakeholders aware, and basically get the stakeholders involved in the areas that one wants to assess. These are the guys on the ground who know the area well, and they can help you gather a representative-, a full picture information, or data, in a certain locality, that an agency has no idea about. The third point is, I think, it's good to cross reference, and in cross referencing, I think taking a small sample from the rest and doing a simple assessment. Basically, after you have done your full assessment, just to collect 10% and try to analyse the 10%. If that information is giving you, like, the same or close results to what you have generally, or in the full picture, then you will know that the data is representative.

AW Thank you, Charles. Thank you. I have a really interesting question that just came in, so I want to make sure that we have time to get to it. So I have a question here from Jessica Romo, who is asking, so she says, 'I might have missed it, but could the speakers comment about the rigour? How is this defined in such contexts? For example, how do we move away from statistic representativeness, in the sampling, for instance, as a measure of rigour, and use another principle such as triangulation, instead.' Would any of our speakers be able to answer that? I'm sorry, I confused the last bit. So do we move away from statistically representative sampling to measure rigour and use another principle such as triangulation instead? Any thoughts from our speakers? Nick, if I point to you?

NP Yes, I mean, I think-, you're quite right to question representativeness in a conflict scenario, because I would doubt we really get representative sampling in many conflicts at all, and so we do need something else that's much more rigorous, and I mean, we-, in the SNAP project, we did do some primary data collection in much of the north of Syria, and I think the struggles we had were-, there were many struggles with that, security being the utmost, but actually, I would say you do want-, definitely we're trying to triangulate, and we're trying to really understand the context of this, but I think we were just very rigorous that if we had data that came back that was-, that we doubted, or that we didn't have confidence in, we chucked that out. We also had a confidence level that we used, so enumerators or assessors went out in pairs, and they had to ask a number of key informants in any one place 30 questions, and they had to rate the level of confidence they-, they asked a number of key informants, and then they would collate the responses into one form for that locality, and they would rate-, we had a confidence scale, for each question they would use the same scale, and basically, you know, the most confident was where three or more independent key informants said the same thing and could back up what they said with evidence, either-, and the enumerators saw the evidence, so for example, if you're talking about population figures, or the number of people that are displaced, somebody actually had a register of displaced people, and that went, so from that level, the highest confidence, all the way down to one person said it, there were no records and other people were disputing that, so nobody really agreed, and the bottom two levels, if information came in and we felt the confidence was in the bottom two, we scrapped it and didn't take it into consideration, and so that was a way of, in a way, ensuring that the data we did consider was a little bit more rigorous. We also debriefed all the enumerators, ideally in person, but some over Skype, because they couldn't actually get out of Syria, but-, and the debrief process would take between one and two hours, and again, during that process, the confidence-, the debriefer would question the assessor on the results they'd found, and give the opportunity to reassess, or re-evaluate the confidence level. So that, in a way that helped us to ensure the assessors had actually collected the right thing, and whether they had really completed, got-, given us the data that they thought they'd given us, in a way. So that's two methods we used.

AW Thank you, Nick. Switching gears a little bit, Elias, I did want to ask you a little bit about third party monitoring, it's a question that came up in the audience, looking at, kind of, the different aspects of your research. So third party monitoring is, of course, a growing trend in the sector, but when is it most appropriate?

ES Well, we do have a separate report on third party monitoring, in which we spell out a number of factors, actually, that are required to make third party monitoring successful. I think if I had to pick only one or two, I would say that it's appropriate when it is not the only source of monitoring information over a longer period of time. So it shouldn't be relied upon exclusively, but complemented with internal monitoring by own staff. Then it can actually be very useful. Also, I think third party monitoring is only appropriate when the agency commissioning the monitoring has sufficient capacity in place, and sufficient resources, to manage the monitoring contracts, and to manage the relationships with partners and monitors, and also to use the information that is collected. We saw in the research that many agencies thought third party monitoring could be a fairly easy fix, like simply outsourcing a standard service, but in reality it required a lot of back and forth, a lot of close management with involvement in, for example, the hiring of monitors, their training, and many other aspects, and I think this should definitely not be underestimated.

AW Thank you. I have a question here from Helen Wang, and I'm going to direct it to you, Charles. So her question is, one of the challenges mentioned is that data collection is donor driven, or organisation driven. What examples did you find where the data collected was analysed and used by the community itself?

CM I think first of all, I would say, the bit about data being donor driven, it depends also with the agency, and the project that basically the agency is running. In one of our projects, we realised it was-, that it just ended recently, October this year. We realised that whatever we are doing, it was something that is only what the donor has to get the data on, or has to get reports on, but the community is able to learn from it, and that was on natural resource management, using cash for work projects. Because we were utilising local materials to reclaim the natural resource of the communities. So from a sustainability angle, what we did is come up with a learning protocol whereby each stakeholder is involved, and in that regard what we did is developed a protocol with the community, including the ministry, and that's the ministry, the government in Somalia, and the communities, including the mayors, who are, like, the lead in a locality. So what we did is coming up with an outcome monitoring kind of a criteria, whereby we collect data, and it's not only our staff that are involved but the community, the group that we have selected, or the community have helped us select, help us collect the data, and analyse the data. It's more of qualitative data. Whereby after we collect data from the community, they try and help us analyse and interpret the data, what it means. We help them add on the results of the outcomes, whereby in case the results are, like, we need to abandon a certain area, then I move to another area that is more prone, or in need, then they are the ones who are leading. Basically, it's a and what, I think, agencies should do is about giving a listening ear to the community, and especially the opinion leaders, because the community members are always going to follow what the opinion leaders of the local administration tell them, or what the local administration is able to lead on. So giving a listening ear, and making the community themselves get involved from the start on data collection is a good thing to do, and is something that is going to bring in greater impacts, and outcomes, at the end of the day.

AW Thank you Charles, very interesting example. Now, I have a question from Lisa Daoud, from Solidarités, I'm going to give it to Elias to start off. In areas where village communities-, sorry, village committees, are not truly representing people's interests, so especially people with specific vulnerabilities, for instance, or where local governance is not structured, or too coloured by the conflict, how can we get first hand feedback from affected people without bypassing anyone? What do you think, Elias?

ES I'm sorry, could you repeat the last part of the question? Without-, how can we get feedback without-, and then it cut off, sorry.

AW Oh, sorry. It's without bypassing anyone.

ES Yes, that's certainly a challenge in practice, and I did mention also communities often feel that only certain influential members of their community are being involved in feedback mechanisms and in conversations with aid agencies. I think the most interesting examples that we saw where agencies managed to get a more inclusive conversation going, and a more representative sample, if you want, were places where different channels were used, for example. Typically, each channel of communication has a certain bias. Of course, if you use mobile phones, you will only reach those with mobile phones. If you do suggestion boxes, you will only reach those who can read and write, and so on, and this is also true for different face to face channels, and so only by combining the different channels into one bigger communication effort, for example, including radio and media that reaches everybody, that's, I think, how one can get the fullest picture, or the most diverse picture, and hopefully not bypass anybody.

AW Right. I have a question that brings us closer to this question of the use of evidence. This is from Judith, I'm very sorry. I'm going to give it first to Nick, actually, because you raised it in your presentation. So the question is, considering the plethora of agencies engaged in collecting data in contexts like Somalia, and people understandably displaying a survey fatigue, how do we promote that data is shared and can be used by several agencies?

NP This is a very timely question, in a way, very pertinent. I've been advocating for this for a long time. I think it's partly a problem of the way the donors operate in funding people based on proposals, and whilst they want organisations to share data, they still fund in a way that encourages organisations to hold onto their data until they've secured that all-precious funding. But I think if we, as humanitarian organisations, are really putting the people first, the beneficiaries first, then we need to come up with ways to share data, but there are various obstacles to sharing data. I have come across it in the past, where organisations have publicly, sort of, undermined other agencies' assessments, saying that they weren't good enough, they weren't up to scratch, and I think first of all we have to-, to basically be less critical of each other, but yet retain the ability to critically examine each other's data, and develop more of an analytical mindset, the fact that certainly in my team in SNAP, I was constantly saying, you know, and in ACAPS now, we try to get people to question each other, to question-, when anybody makes a statement, or draws a conclusion, people immediately start to question it. Not-, not to be negative, but to strengthen the analysis, and strengthen the underlying argument. So I think we've got to just build up that ability for people to feel confident in open analysis. Projects such as SNAP gave that forum because people could share confidentially with us, and by the end we had organisations giving us huge amounts of data, and in return we would get to see it, get to include it in the analysis, we wouldn't necessarily make it public, but it was a half way to making it public, because we-, everything we produced was public, and we were in a great position of being completely independent and not competing with anybody for funds to respond. But I think that's a problem that's going to take quite a long time to solve, and it will come down to individuals in the field deciding that joint analysis is more valuable, and it results in better programming than organisations being very stove piped in their analysis, and being independent and not sharing data.

AW Thank you, Nick. Charles, would you like to come in here? Do you have any experiences of sharing your information, from a local organisation perspective, with international NGOs?

CM Yes, I think information sharing is a critical issue, and as Nick has mentioned, this is something that many agencies usually hold onto data information, and until they get the funding, and then they are able to at least share with the rest. But also, there are some avenues that we in Somalia are using, and in the region, basically to share information, and this includes the cluster systems that have been created. The Food Security cluster, Nutrition cluster, Protection cluster. So because these are the-, like, likeminded agencies, or guys that are working in the same thematic area, so these are where-, this is where agencies have technical, skilled experts, who can help make that information solid. So it's good if we can share this information, not only after we've developed the report, but even before. Like, recently in the Food Security cluster, what we were discussing is before one conducts an assessment on food security and livelihood, he should share with the Food Security cluster leads, those tools, so at least they can help enrich them. Or those agencies may go in with different objectives, but there are those, like, thematic indicators that are so paramount in certain scenarios, so it's better if we do share these tools, and at the end of the day, share the report or the information that we have got from the assessment, widely for everyone to know, and it also gives credibility and validation to the information that has been provided. Apart from the clusters, we have the technical working group, like Cash working group, Food Security and Nutrition Analysis working group. We have working groups for disaster risk reduction. These are also areas that we have technical expertise and people who can critique certain information and also try to enrich further whatever you've gathered from the field, and more so even give further validation and even use it, and nowadays you'll understand, many donors have come in and are able-, are taking in the idea about agencies sharing information and utilising it, because it gives more credibility and validation. I think forming these groups, both at the field level and regional, or a, like us, at Nairobi level, it's so paramount and is something that we should continue because it helps us learn more, share more, and even tell those donors that at least we are able to work together and bring great impacts into these communities.

AW Thank you Charles, that's a very interesting point, this aspect of validation. Elias, I now have a question for you from Jill and she is asking if you could elaborate on the absorptive capacity of INGOs, or agencies, of absorbing data, so is there a maximum, is there a glass ceiling? Are we reaching a maximum? What does that look like?

ES Yes, I think there is a maximum, definitely, and I think I can only second Nick's earlier point on how analysis is often the more important aspect, compared to the overall amount of data, and sort of like with human perception, if we were to register all and everything going around us, we would probably go crazy and would not be able to decide anything, so it's really about limiting the data that is out there, and picking exactly the segment of the overall data that is relevant to the question that you have and now this sounds all very theoretical, but I think for example in Syria, we saw that-, or at least that's what some organisations told us, that they are almost drowning in feedback data received through WhatsApp, for example. It's very easy to set up a WhatsApp group, it's very easy to reach a lot of people, and also receive a lot of responses, but then this doesn't tell you anything without the proper analysis, and sometimes it can be better to go out and seek specific feedback and ask specific questions, rather than, sort of, opening up all gates and then drowning in a sea of data that is very difficult to analyse.

AW Thank you. That's-, a sea of data, a new expression for the book. So, now, Nick, you may have the last word, actually. So I have one final question for you. How can organisations raise awareness of the limitations to the data, so that findings are not taken out of context and are used appropriately to inform decision making?

NP Yes, this is another one of my pet subjects, in a way, and we had-, we came across this a lot in the early days covering Syria, with SNAP. It's a fine balance, really, because you know, you need to get your key messages across, you want people to sit up and take notice of the key finding of an assessment, or any piece of analysis, but at the same time, it is, you know, very good practice and, you know, it's beholden on all of us, to explicitly state the limitations, and one of the challenges I find as a native English speaker is that I will phrase things in a way that is very correct in English but actually is still open to misinterpretation. So one has to be clear what one is saying as a result of the data, and what one cannot say, but we came up-, we had a problem with, you know, one of the reports that was put out where it was-, the whole report was put together by a great committee of OCHA, ourselves, various other actors on the ground, and in the end there was a-, there was a huge number of limitations to the exercise that were put before the actual results, and you know, one or two people sort of turned around and said, 'Well, hold on, if this is all the limitations, what use is this? What can we use it for?' and so you have to be clear to the user, you know, in a way, yes, what is the data? What is the data saying, what is it not saying, and then what-, in a way, how can you use that? I would just say be upfront, give the limit of your-, I mean, certainly, you know, in a conflict situation I would never really claim representativeness, and I would use-, use phrases that, you know, explain that from the limited amount of primary data, but confirmed by, you know, various sources, secondary data, it is apparent that these are the major concerns, or this is the major need, or you know, unless you are absolutely certain of something, and then you state it explicitly. So I would just make sure that whenever one is putting out assessment findings, it is clear on what you are basing those findings, and yes, the limitations of your assessment, your research.

AW Thank you. Well, thank you everyone, for participating today. I hope you enjoyed the discussion. Keep your eyes peeled for the next webinar in this series, it will be taking place in early 2017. As I mentioned, this webinar was recorded, the video, audio and transcript will be made available in a couple of weeks' time, and of course go to Twitter and check out some of the good practice examples that were shared, using the hashtag #evidencecrisis. Thank you, and good morning, good evening and good night. Bye!