



**MONITORING &  
EVALUATION**

 **ALNAP**



**M&E during COVID-19 series**

# **Getting remote M&E right:**

**Ethics, challenges and gaps**

Linda Raftree

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

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#### **Acknowledgements**

Within the ALNAP Secretariat, thank you to Samir Hafiz for his research support and coordination of the Skills-Building Workshop series, to Susanna Morrison-Metois and Alice Obrecht for their continued steer throughout the research, and to Maria Gili, Danny Liu and Saoirse Docherty for their excellent communications work. Thank you also to Daniel Squire who provided operational support throughout the project. Finally, thank you to all participants of the Skills-Building Workshops and interviewees who shared their time with Linda and ALNAP. This research would not have been possible without everyone's insights and learning exchanges.

The opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of ALNAP Members. Responsibility for the views expressed remains solely with the authors.

#### **Suggested citation**

Raftree, L. (2021) Getting remote M&E right: Ethics, challenges and gaps. ALNAP Paper. London: ODI/ ALNAP.

ISBN: 978-1-913526-18-4

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Cover photo: Remote monitoring. Credit: DG ECHO.

Communications management by Maria Gili

Copyediting by Anna Brown

Typesetting by Hannah Bass

Design by Soapbox, [www.soapbox.co.uk](http://www.soapbox.co.uk)

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# Summary

**Humanitarians have often used remote monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approaches when working in complex, fragile and conflict-affected environments. However, COVID-19 has impacted M&E practice in a large and unexpected way, with global travel restrictions and other measures to reduce the spread of the virus leading to a surge in the use of remote digital M&E methods over 2020 and 2021. While some of the remote mechanisms may just be temporary, others may become integrated into existing approaches or used as additional ways to gather data for M&E in the long term.**

This paper explores some of the implications of the rapid shift towards remote M&E, drawing on reflections from a series of M&E Skills-Building Workshops hosted by ALNAP in February 2021 for humanitarian M&E practitioners. It summarises five key areas where there are ethical issues, challenges, gaps and limitations with remote M&E, and highlights emerging good practice.

## 1. Inclusion

The digital divide excludes voices and prioritises those with greater access and power. During 2020 and 2021, humanitarian organisations have worked with local organisations as much as possible, and have invested in understanding digital access in different contexts, actively designing for remote participation, and simplifying M&E tools, methods and approaches.

## 2. Safety and well-being

Poorly implemented remote M&E can compromise health and safety, especially of vulnerable groups. Good practice in this area includes avoiding unnecessary or highly sensitive data collection, assessing whether confidentiality is possible, and signposting available support services. Additional demands on national staff and local partners have heightened the risk to their safety and well-being; ensuring adequate support for those in data collection roles is necessary to mitigate risk transference.

### **3. Expectations and trust**

Remote M&E often raises expectations of support; too much data-gathering can cause various kinds of tension. Building trust and rapport before moving to data collection is necessary. Good practice includes working with trusted key informants and experienced staff, focusing on immediate needs that can be resolved or feedback that can be addressed, and negotiating with donors on the amount of data that is required.

### **4. Data quality**

Exclusion and lack of on-the-ground context can lead to biased, unreliable data and poor decisions. Good practice includes triangulating data, validating findings with communities, and adapting sampling to calibrate for reduced data quality and validity, and higher non-response rates. It is important to consider the value of having biased data right now versus having better data later.

### **5. Data protection**

An increase in digital data collection leaves respondents open to data privacy risks as well as government and corporate surveillance. Minimising the amount and sensitivity of data that is collected and protecting data along the data lifecycle can help to mitigate this. Other good practice examples include ensuring that active and informed consent is obtained, being transparent on data use, and completing a risk–benefits assessment before proceeding with remote M&E approaches.

# Introduction and background

Over the past decade, humanitarian operations have increased their use of digital tools and platforms for both programming and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities. Remote digital methods enabled some activities to continue in fragile contexts and situations where evaluators or front-line staff might be at risk if working in person – for example, during the Ebola crisis. Remote digital M&E has helped humanitarians to reach previously inaccessible populations, improve scale and efficiency, and reduce costs. The emergence of the COVID-19 Pandemic in early 2020 forced humanitarian professionals to reconsider traditional face-to-face M&E activities (CartONG and Groupe URD, 2021). Social distancing measures, well-being concerns and travel restrictions accelerated the use of remote digital approaches and made it possible for M&E practitioners to collect data in contactless ways, thereby avoiding additional spread of the virus.

As reliance grows on remote M&E approaches, so too do the opportunities and risks. Whether collaborating more with local partners and third-party monitors or replicating traditional M&E with digital tools, M&E practitioners need to be clear about the potential benefits of these methods as well as the gaps, challenges and ethical considerations that come with them.

While there are indeed situations where digital approaches enable greater inclusion and reach, digital tools are also known to exclude certain individuals and communities, generally the most vulnerable. Moreover, a reduced awareness of context can contribute to biased interpretations of data and missed opportunities for inquiry. Despite these concerns, it is likely that some combination of in-person and remote digital M&E will be the norm through the current pandemic and beyond. Thus, it is important to identify ways to improve remote M&E practices.

This paper investigates the ethics of remote approaches, key challenges, gaps and limitations, as well as emerging good practices in remote M&E. Findings are based on a review of relevant grey literature on remote M&E during the COVID-19 Pandemic, a limited number of key informant interviews (KIIs), and two workshops in February 2021 which brought together some 40 M&E practitioners to share direct experiences of conducting traditional M&E activities remotely during the Pandemic.

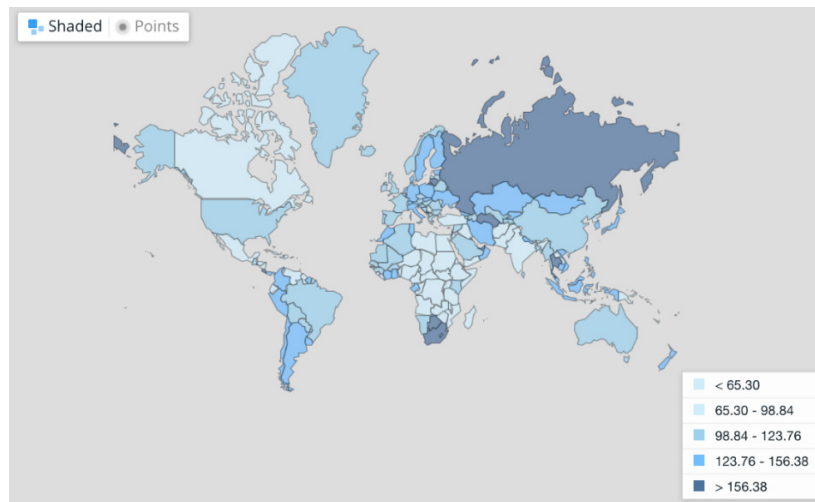
Below we delve deeper into the five interconnected areas related to the ethics and challenges of remote M&E that our research highlighted:

1. Inclusion
2. Safety and well-being
3. Expectations and trust
4. Data quality
5. Data protection

# 1 Inclusion

Many remote M&E approaches aim to replace in-person activities with digital, contactless data collection. This can lead to the exclusion of vulnerable individuals and groups. While mobile phone and internet access have increased significantly over the past few years, by the end of 2019, mobile data and fixed broadband were still only available to 51% of the global population (International Telecommunications Union (ITU), n.d.). Digital approaches, especially those based on mobile devices, have led to greater inclusion in some cases. Yet, those who do not access or use mobiles for various reasons (lack of a device, inability to pay for airtime, poor network connectivity, lack of electricity, cultural, gender and age barriers to mobile access, literacy and language, and others) are left out of mobile-based initiatives (Dette, et al., 2016) (Raftree, 2020a) (Bamberger, et al., 2016). Mobile penetration rates at the national or household level are important indicators of access and use – but who adopts mobile technology also matters.

**Figure 1: Mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 people**

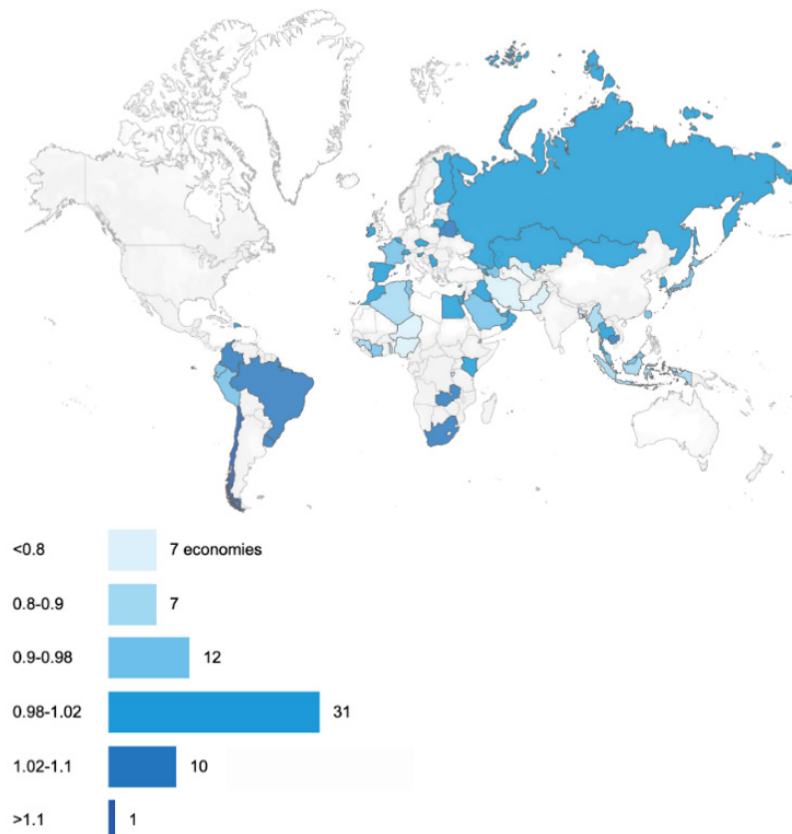


Source: World Bank (2021)

‘Elite capture’ is a problem that occurs with digital-only approaches. Digital channels tend to engage people who are younger, male, of higher income and educational attainment, and who are more frequent social

media users (Spada, et al., 2016). In effect, they capture the voices and opinions of the more elite segments of a population. People living in remote and rural locations are often unreachable. Even when organisations strive to hear directly from affected communities through digital means, lack of access often means that they can only get in touch with staff and partners who speak *on behalf* of community members rather than connecting with community members themselves. Reaching rural women is difficult, for example, especially if cultural norms reduce women's autonomy (Bamberger, et al., 2016). While some countries have reached gender parity in terms of mobile phone access and use, women in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) overall are still 20% less likely than men to use the mobile internet (GSM Association, 2020). Children may also have less access. In Bangladesh and Zimbabwe, fewer than one in twenty children aged under 15 uses the internet (UNICEF, 2017). Children in general may have limited opportunities to provide feedback or engage with remote M&E because they do not have their own devices or airtime and they lack the privacy to speak freely. People living with a disability are often also less likely to access and use mobile devices (Downer, 2019).

**Figure 2: Gender parity for mobile phone ownership, 2017-2019**



Source: GSM Association (2020)

COVID-19 can further interfere with mobile and internet access and use. During lockdowns, people who do not have a home-based network connection might lose access. Economic shutdowns can interfere with airtime purchases and phone recharging. Stores, kiosks and market stands (where people purchase airtime and charge their phones) might be closed or airtime budgets might be spent on food or other urgent needs, like healthcare. When recharging is a challenge, people are harder to reach because they tend to turn their phones off when not using them. In some extreme cases, such as in the Cox's Bazaar refugee camp in Bangladesh, the government has forbidden mobile phones. A participant of the ALNAP workshop on ethics, gaps and challenges in remote M&E noted that this has made remote monitoring difficult and risky for both agencies and those who might take part in the monitoring. In other contexts, governments have shut down mobile networks and the internet during elections, periods of unrest, or in specific districts.

Even when access is possible, getting people to take part in a remote M&E exercise can be a challenge, especially if there is low awareness and interest or the survey interface is challenging to use. One organisation reported that only 10% of people they wanted to reach answered their calls, and of those, 70% completed their survey. The same organisation reported that a high number of phone numbers did not work or were associated with different people from those they were trying to reach (ALNAP, 2021).

If confined to the home because of COVID-19, women and children might not be able to borrow a phone from a friend or neighbour, or to speak privately. This has led to a reduced ability to monitor levels of sexual and gender-based violence and child protection issues.

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**If we call someone, it's usually a male head of household. If we want to talk with a woman, she may be afraid of answering the questions because the father or husband is there. We used to find lots of sexual and gender-based violence and child protection issues. Now this is not possible. We are not basing our M&E on very representative samples because we don't have kids, persons with disabilities, the elderly, and women. The problem is not an issue of phone ownership. At least one phone is there per household, but it's owned by the male (Comment during group discussion at the Ethics of Remote M&E Workshops, February 2021).**

Another issue related to inclusion is assessment fatigue. While many agencies are shortening their surveys, there are still often multiple assessments taking place with the same populations.

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**We're working in northern Lebanon with Syrians, trying to coordinate with other agencies to reduce the number of assessments. But each agency still has to take care of its own M&E (Comment during group discussion at the Ethics of Remote M&E Workshops, February 2021).**

These inclusion issues lead to skewed participation. Important voices are missing, which lowers data quality, potentially making remote M&E findings less reliable. Collecting sensitive demographic data (such as ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, or disability) can help identify issues with elite capture, yet it also makes surveys longer and less likely to be completed, and creates additional data privacy risks.

## 1.1 How can we improve inclusion?

M&E practitioners can improve inclusion by focusing on the following:

- 1. Understand context and patterns of device use** when planning a digital approach to reach habitually excluded groups. Be aware that the approach might need to differ from country to country, survey to survey, and community to community in the same country (GOARN RCCE Working Group, 2020).
- 2. Actively design remote M&E for participation and inclusion.** Include monitoring in other activities that are meaningful and valuable for the community. Ask participants to keep a diary or to take part in a photo project, where the activity is both interesting and helpful for them and the data is useful for monitoring community well-being. Combine feedback mechanisms and M&E to avoid separate processes that contribute to assessment fatigue (ALNAP, 2021). Use posters, radio and toll-free numbers as part of outreach and data collection activities. Find ways to support specific populations to participate, such as incorporating the option for someone to help a respondent take a survey. In one study, Innovations in Poverty Action reported that 87% of those being surveyed over mobile phones reported having a physical condition that posed a barrier to survey completion. When asked early in the survey if they wanted to include a trusted helper, 25% of respondents said yes (Glynn-Broderick, 2020). In another project, 50% of children asked an adult to help them fill in consent forms. The organisation asked these adult helpers to sign a form agreeing not to share the child's thoughts and answers with anyone else (ALNAP, 2021).
- 3. Make it simple and easy to take part.** People will tend to give up before completion if a mobile survey is complicated, long, too detailed, boring, or off-putting. Prioritising 'must have' information and keeping surveys to about 15 minutes help to ensure meaningful engagement from respondents (Mercy Corps, 2020). Use voice messaging instead of SMS if literacy is low or if people use small phones that are difficult to type on. Offer a choice of languages to help ensure that people can fully express themselves. Provide a call-back option in case a call drops. Conduct testing to see what time of day gets the best response rate. Engage people through existing platforms rather than introducing new ones (GOARN RCCE Working Group, 2020).

**4. Work with third-party partners, organisations and community groups.** Rather than relying solely on digital approaches to remote M&E, strengthen relationships with community leaders and community-based organisations to maintain contact with programme participants. In many cases, communities continue to hold safe and socially distanced gatherings. These might be an opportunity to announce and explain upcoming monitoring activities (ALNAP, 2021). Local actors may be willing to suggest the best way to contact programme participants, modalities to reach people, and the preferred languages in which to conduct outreach or M&E activities. In some cases, communities might feel abandoned, especially remote communities that are hard to reach. If possible, devise a safe way to combine remote M&E with periodic face-to-face visits (keeping to social distancing rules and precautions, and following any government lockdown orders or other restrictions) (Plexico Sinclair and Vestrheim, 2020) (GOARN RCCE Working Group, 2020)

## 2 Safety and well-being

Health and safety of community members, staff and partners should remain the top priority when planning and conducting M&E, including remote M&E. Communities are under high levels of stress already due to the Pandemic, so organisations should avoid overburdening people with unnecessary messaging, surveys and outreach. Two key areas regarding safety and well-being related to remote M&E are: 1) when addressing highly sensitive topics; and 2) when exposing staff to risk.

In terms of sensitive topics, the most prevalent concerns are related to gender-based violence and violence against children, both of which are on the rise due to the economic and mental stresses of COVID-19. Women and children are particularly vulnerable when in lockdown with abusers (Mani and Barooah, 2020). Organisations should prioritise safety and might need to postpone inquiry related to violence, as it is a highly sensitive undertaking that requires established protocols that might not be possible if collecting data digitally or relying on partners to do data collection. Failure to take the risks of data collection into account places vulnerable people at risk of (further) violence. In any case, poorly designed research or pursuit of research in pandemic conditions can result in underreporting or low-quality findings, meaning that it could be both a waste of important resources and a generator of added harm for highly vulnerable people (Namy and Dartnall, 2020) (UNICEF, 2020).

Headquarter and country offices have placed increased demands on local staff and partners, putting them at risk of exposure to COVID-19. This heavier workload, for example an increase in remote meetings intended to facilitate upward communication, has come without an increase in resources, capacity-strengthening and compensation, making it burdensome for local staff (CartONG and Groupe URD, 2021). Staff, many of whom are affected personally in some way by the disease, have reported higher levels of stress and mental health issues. These are compounded by rapid shifts in M&E modalities and pressure to quickly adapt to new, digital ways of working under already stressful conditions. Furthermore, not all organisations have budgeted for personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff or conducted robust risk assessments for in-person data collection (ALNAP, 2021).

## 2.1 How can we support safety and well-being?

### 1. Avoid unnecessary data-gathering, even if done remotely.

Asking affected communities to take part in research or M&E during highly stressful times such as a pandemic can put them under unnecessary stress and lead to survey fatigue. If a survey is going to improve respondents' lives in the next few months, then it may be justifiable to go ahead with it. If not, it may be better to postpone it (Mani and Barooah, 2020) (Coffey, 2020) (Winrock International, 2020). If possible, find other data sources and proxies that might provide data that is 'good enough' for the purpose at hand and postpone the data collection until a later date (Maglio, 2020) (Mani and Barooah, 2020) (Feedback Labs, 2020). Always review the ethical viability of going ahead with remote data collection (Namy and Dartnall, 2020). Avoid any methods that might expose people to COVID-19 (for example, to borrow a phone or charge a device) (Mani and Barooah, 2020).

### 2. Avoid highly sensitive topics because neither respondents nor enumerators can control all the factors influencing the privacy of a call or of a device (Mercy Corps, 2020). Evidence on gender-based violence and violence against children can help agencies to understand how to provide better support to children during the COVID-19 Pandemic; however, privacy and safety are more difficult to ensure due to COVID-19-related restrictions. Primary data collection on violence should be avoided (UNICEF, 2020).

### 3. Do not assume confidentiality. Even when efforts are **not** addressing sensitive topics, respondents might not be alone while taking part in remote M&E surveys or online focus groups. SMS and other forms of communication can put women and children who are in restrictive or abusive homes at risk because calls can be overheard and SMS and call records can be viewed by anyone who has direct access to their phone (Dette, et al., 2016).

### 4. Do not keep women on the phone for extended periods. Enumerators should always identify themselves and their reason for calling. Women could be subject to increased domestic violence if they spend too much time on a call, especially if their potential abuser is unaware of or disagrees with the purpose of a call (Mani and Barooah, 2020).

### 5. Be prepared to 'signpost' (i.e., direct people to available resources or help). People will not always stick to the topic of the survey – they may raise other topics and ask for support, and enumerators should be ready to offer orientation and resources like hotlines and helplines. Equip enumerators with a list of local resources they can provide (Maglio, 2020). If collaborating with third-party monitors, provide training and orientation on referrals if they are not familiar with an organisation's wider programming and available services and resources. (Minozzi, 2021). Provide orientation about COVID-19 and its transmission, how and when to isolate or quarantine, and where medical care can be sought (Mercy Corps, 2020) (GOARN RCCE Working Group, 2020).

- 6. Avoid transferring risk to local staff and local partner organisations** by expecting them to conduct activities that were previously the responsibility of headquarter or country offices, without added PPE, training, support, funding and capacity increases. While COVID-19 has opened an opportunity for greater localisation of M&E, this needs support and funding. Organisations should budget for PPE for staff and partners if asking them to conduct in-person work that exposes them to COVID-19. Heightened security or other protection might also be needed in cases where the economic fallout of the disease has led to increased insecurity or where COVID-related political instability could put staff at greater risk of being stopped or harassed for travelling outside their homes (ALNAP, 2021). Staff may also need mental health support or a safe space for support that will help them feel less isolated during long quarantines or lockdowns.



Photo credit: Barbara Minishi/European Union

### 3 Expectations and trust

Organisations might inadvertently raise expectations that help is coming when they make contact with communities to conduct M&E. They should avoid giving the impression that they can offer support that they cannot currently provide. Unfulfilled expectations can increase levels of stress and feelings of abandonment and lower levels of trust between communities and organisations.

M&E activities for a specific programme can be confusing for communities if they need services that are not offered within that programme. For example, when the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Economic Security Unit conducted a survey about COVID-19, some respondents raised protection and mental health issues that enumerators were not equipped to deal with because they had been trained on economic security. The team adapted by ensuring that enumerators had protection-focused resources on hand (Minozzi, 2021). Where communities are not feeling the effects of COVID-19 (the illness), but are feeling the brunt of its economic impact, agencies that focus on COVID prevention messaging could be seen as siding with a government's economic shutdown efforts and ignoring communities' felt needs (ALNAP, 2021).

Contactless M&E has led some donors to tighten their compliance and anti-fraud requirements. This can overburden implementation partners with time-consuming and repeated requests for proof of service delivery or aid. Collecting excessive verification or audit data can lead to a reduction in trust among agencies and their partners. Additional monitoring for accountability purposes can feel extractive because its focus on fulfilling upstream requirements does not offer tangible benefit to communities or local partners. A heavy-handed focus on fraud prevention introduces a sense that local partners and communities cannot be trusted (ALNAP, 2021).

### 3.1 How can we manage expectations and maintain trust?

- 1. Avoid extractive processes.** Use M&E processes to stay in touch with communities, to engage with local actors and to build relationships of trust and support. If done well and with a focus on community well-being, remote M&E can be reframed as a way for organisations to engage more directly with community members, co-create reporting and feedback systems, break down accessibility barriers, and speak more directly with programme participants (CartONG and Groupe URD, 2021) (ALNAP, 2021).
- 2. Build trust.** Spend a little extra time at the start of a call (or other data-gathering exercise) to build rapport so that people feel comfortable. This might mean reducing the quantity of survey questions to the absolute minimum and putting demographic questions towards the end (Glynn-Broderick, 2020). (Mani and Barooah, 2020) (Feedback Labs, 2020). Use a female voice on recorded messages so that women are more comfortable about participating. Ensure that any third parties who are collecting data on behalf of an organisation are trusted and introduced to the community before any data collection begins (ALNAP, 2021).
- 3. Focus on immediate needs** of affected people. Needs stemming from the COVID-19 crisis are enormous and widespread. Communities may not distinguish between organisations or programmes when contacted for remote monitoring. It is important to be very clear about how an organisation will act on the information it hears. Even if an immediate response to someone's needs is impossible, it is important to clearly communicate what can be done or not done, and why. Only seek feedback that can be acted on within a clear timeline. Tailor questions to reflect specific programmes that can be delivered. This helps to build trust and lets people know that their time and input are valued (Feedback Labs, 2020). Create opportunities for project stakeholders and leadership teams to hear, learn and reflect on community feedback, and ensure that community inputs are used to adapt and improve on programming. Then close the feedback loop by using accessible communication means to discuss with communities on how to use the information to make improvements (ALNAP, 2021).
- 4. Monitor through trusted key informants** (such as local project staff, extension workers, community health workers, non-governmental groups), if they have access to SMS, voice calls, or mobile internet. M&E specialists may be able to remotely train key informants to collect monitoring data. Since most digital data collection apps used in the development and humanitarian contexts work offline, enumerators in low-connectivity locations can collect data and send it once they are connected. Geo-located data can help with data quality assurance (USAID, 2020).

5. **Move hotline staff to remote M&E efforts.** Third-party monitoring firms might be inclined to focus only on specific thematic areas because they have limited experience with signposting to other available organisational programmes. The ICRC found that involving hotline staff in a needs assessment worked well because they were familiar with all ICRC programmes and could signpost people to different available services (Minozzi, 2021).
6. **Negotiate with donors about how much data is needed for accountability.** Balance donor requirements with trust and data privacy to avoid invasive data collection. Continuously pressuring for more data can damage relationships between staff and communities, and between an organisation and its partners. M&E staff can also take on the role of pushing back against excessive data demands by consistently asking ‘Why do we need this data? How will it be used?’

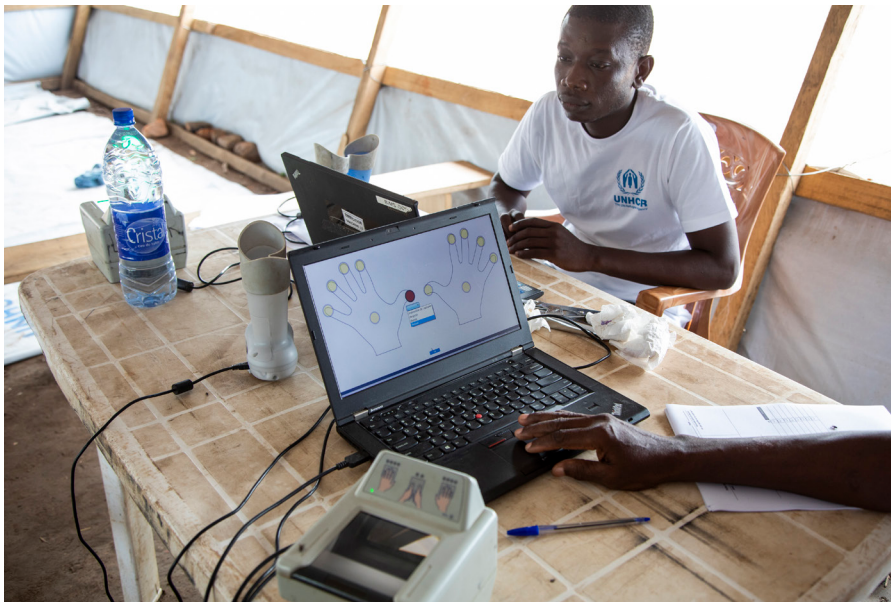


Photo credit: Dominique Catton/European Union

## 4 Data quality

When access to affected populations is reduced and digital tools are the only means of data collection, representative sampling is difficult. Purposive sampling and self-selection, common during remote monitoring, can lead to exclusion and selection bias, which lower data quality. In difficult-to-reach contexts, quantitative data provided by digital tools does not fully capture complex inequalities and power dynamics. It is also difficult to vet small or inconclusive data sets through triangulation when remote M&E is the only choice. These challenges mean that remote data may present an ‘alternative reality’. Some organisations warn against basing decisions on remote data because it often suffers in quality (Jaspars, 2020)(Bryant, et al., 2020) (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2020). Some mobile data collection applications do have built-in data quality checks that are useful, but this does not resolve the wider issue (ALNAP, 2021).

When organisations only measure what they can see and count, and they do so through a screen, they are likely to miss out on highly critical data that they would normally capture by being present. They might also see patterns that don’t exist or focus on data that reconfirms existing assumptions because there is less context to inform analysis and decisions (ALNAP, 2021). Remote monitoring does not offer a ‘vivid picture’ of the programme in context. Normally, the issue of blurred understanding is resolved with first-hand engagement, yet remote monitoring does not allow for this, leading to strong limitations in gauging the relevance of interventions. When teams cannot interact directly with people in their communities, they lose context. They cannot know who is in the room with the person they are calling for a survey or take cues from body language to note how comfortable someone is feeling. Children especially might be difficult to ‘read’ if only working virtually or by mobile phone. When M&E is done with remote approaches, it is also not possible to gain insights into the wider context by walking around or looking to see who is missing from outreach efforts. Desk research, social media observation and community radio can help M&E practitioners to gain context, yet elite capture is a challenge with these channels, and this can skew understanding towards those who have more access to digital communications and who are bolder in expressing their opinions in a public setting.

Quantitative data is considered easier to collect via a device or a third-party monitoring partner, but there are concerns that third-party monitors might struggle to monitor or evaluate an organisation's training, social support, gender, or child protection methodologies, as these require more in-depth knowledge (Marrach, 2021). Some organisations have tried working directly with community leaders but recognise that community leaders may be motivated to create a particular view of the community and its needs (ALNAP, 2021).

**If you do have community leaders [to] collect data, can you trust the data? You might get very different responses from community leaders and from community members. This is hard to overcome. It's really important to work with leaders, but then data can't be entirely trusted. Maybe community leaders are elites (Comment during group discussion at the Ethics of Remote M&E Workshops, February 2021).**

#### **4.1 How can we improve data quality?**

- 1. Adjust sampling and other methods.** Remote digital monitoring skews towards certain individuals, and so it is important to adjust methodologies, recruitment and sampling to reduce bias. Adjusted methods might be a possibility. The Harvard Humanitarian Initiative used respondent-driven sampling (RDS) for an evaluation with Venezuelan migrants, which included social media and in-person recruitment, longer recruitment chains, a weighting system to account for individuals with large social networks, and the establishment of local trusted sites/groups where in-person surveys were done using safety protocols. (It should be noted that the statistical feasibility of this hybrid model is still being explored.) (Pham, 2021)
- 2. Combine quantitative and qualitative data collection.** Digital surveys favour highly structured questions and work better with pre-defined answer choices because it is difficult to enter large quantities of text on small smartphone displays (Dette, et al., 2016). This can influence the type of data gathered. Mercy Corps recommends scaling up remote qualitative data collection by phone or WhatsApp to supplement quantitative findings. When doing so, it is important to create a sampling strategy that ensures the qualitative data broadly reflects the different sub-populations of interest. It is likely that the most vulnerable will not take part, so their perspectives need to be accounted for in future reporting (Mercy Corps, 2020). Sampling and recruitment need to be adapted to avoid bias (Survey CTO, 2020).

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- 3. Weigh the potential for biased data and the value of having data right now.** Teams conducting digital surveys will only be able to contact households that have access to a phone and can keep it charged, meaning that any data collected will be biased towards those with more resources. As noted earlier, women in many countries and communities are less likely to own or have access to a phone, so if planning a survey aimed at women, postponement should be considered (Mercy Corps, 2020).
  - 4. Account for higher non-response rates when designing a sampling strategy.** There may be a higher non-response rate or a greater likelihood of interviewing the wrong person when conducting remote monitoring by phone. Use the level of non-response rates observed during piloting to inform adjustments to standard non-response rates. Train enumerators who are making calls on who is appropriate to interview and how to ensure that the person answering the phone is the correct person to interview (Mercy Corps, 2020).
  - 5. Validate findings with communities.** There are many concerns about data quality when conducting digital M&E, yet many organisations remain hesitant to contract local, on the ground, in-person groups. This could mean that data is even less grounded and heavily influenced by non-local contexts and external lenses. Triangulation is critical, as is combining remote and in-person data collection with local guidance and direction from those who understand the context. Another good practice for vetting remote M&E findings is providing summaries of data back to communities and creating genuine opportunities for them to influence the findings and conclusions. Routine data quality audits can also be instituted, where a percentage of data collected is validated each quarter, for example, through call-backs and comparisons with original documents (ALNAP, 2021).

## 5 Data protection

While exclusion is a risk with remote M&E, collecting data from excluded groups can lead to harm if not properly handled. Risks brought about by making a group more visible by collecting their data must be assessed against the risks of exclusion. When people are scared, such as during the COVID-19 crisis, they may be willing to hand over their personal and sensitive data more easily. M&E practitioners need to ensure that they protect data from misuse. They must also put in place clear, transparent and ethical processes to explain to people how their data will be used and to obtain their active and informed consent.

Corporate and state surveillance is one challenge of working through digital devices and platforms (Dette, et al., 2016) (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2020). Digital data transmission increases risk because third parties including foreign and national intelligence, non-state actors and private companies can intercept transmitted data (Dette, et al., 2016). For example, governments could use mobile phone location at the aggregate level to crack down on populations in specific geographies who are not following a curfew.

Public social media pages and messaging apps are not private, and individuals often do not know how to manage their privacy settings. This leaves them open to others in the community seeing and reading posts as well as exposes them to corporate and state surveillance of online and phone communication. In conflict environments especially, this put individuals at significant risk (Dette, et al., 2016). When organisations encourage people to use online platforms, they could be inadvertently forcing people to consent to sharing their data with these platforms.

Even in 'normal' times, agencies do not always realise that the data they hold has been leaked or breached. The decentralised nature of much of the work being done from individual homes and personal devices during the Pandemic makes detecting a breach even more difficult. M&E practitioners should maintain high ethical and legal standards when collecting any data and be aware of the specific risks inherent with digital data.

## 5.1 How can we improve data protection?

- 1. Data minimisation.** Ensure that there is a clear purpose for every data point that will be collected (UNHCR, 2015) (USAID, 2019) (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2020). Avoid collecting sensitive personal data if possible, such as on religious or ethnic affiliation, political opinions, religious beliefs, sensitive health information, gender-based violence experiences, or topics that could lead to social stigma (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2020) (USAID, 2019) (OCHA, 2019).
- 2. Update informed consent protocols.** Some researchers counsel that because respondents are going through a stressful time, it can be difficult for them to give true consent, making the validity of consent obtained in unusual circumstances questionable. Short and simple consent scripts may not be enough; a better approach is to give respondents the information they need and encourage them to ask questions (Mani and Barooah, 2020). Ideas for improving informed consent include creating an audio recording of the consent explanation for those with lower literacy or asking a set of control questions after the consent explanation to test whether people have understood what they are consenting to (ALNAP, 2021). Be sure to follow any national legislation related to consent and call-recording (J-PAL, 2020). If contacting people for a new study, check consent language to ensure that re-contacting respondents for a new purpose is allowed. It may be necessary to ask for consent again before continuing with data collection. Make sure that respondents are aware of their unconditional right to withdraw and of the potential risks in taking part in the research, including the risk of someone overhearing the conversation on either end of a device (Maglio, 2020).
- 3. Do a risk–benefits assessment** before starting a remote data collection exercise, including a review of the type of data, the tool and the wider potential for harm. Consider any possible adverse impact first on affected communities, and second on an organisation. Based on the assessment, consider where risk can be mitigated. If potential harms cannot be reduced to an acceptable level, do not proceed (USAID, 2019) (World Food Programme, 2016) (UNICEF, 2020) (OCHA, 2019) (World Food Programme, 2017).
- 4. Establish a data-sharing or data-processing agreement** to ensure that responsibilities and liabilities for any data breach, unauthorised sharing, or other harm from data collection are clear and that all involved parties can be held accountable (OCHA, 2019) (Cash Learning Partnership, 2020) (Cash Learning Partnership, 2020a). Before entering into an agreement, conduct due diligence on third parties that will be involved in data collection, analysis and storage to ensure that the third party has a solid reputation and adequate data-protection procedures are in place (Cash Learning Partnership, 2020) (OCHA, 2019).

5. **Review and ensure data security** along the entire data lifecycle, from collection to transmission to storage through to data retention and disposal. Store data in a highly secure environment and limit access to data to a ‘need to know’ basis. IT teams may be able to help protect data along the full lifecycle. (USAID, 2019) (UNICEF, 2020) (The Engine Room, n/d) (Cash Learning Partnership, 2020) (OCHA, 2019) (Survey CTO, 2020) (J-PAL, 2020)

## 5.2 Final thoughts

As COVID-19 made travel and contact with communities difficult or impossible, many M&E activities previously conducted by headquarters or country office specialists were shifted to local staff, third-party monitors or implemented fully or partially via digital devices and applications.

Some positive elements of this shift include:

- a greater value placed on the work of local staff and partners
- an opportunity to co-create M&E and improve community engagement
- space to enhance the local relevance of M&E
- a chance to assess different digital tools and approaches for M&E and learn how to improve them.

In many cases, COVID-19 opened space for local actors to play a stronger role in the international humanitarian M&E system and for digital M&E, combined with in-person efforts, to reduce reliance on external actors. At the same time, gaps related to inclusion, safety and well-being, expectations and trust, data quality and data protection are still significant. These five areas are interrelated: lack of access to mobile devices is linked to inclusion and inclusion affects data quality; concerns related to consent are linked with safety, trust and data protection; survey fatigue influences community trust as well as data quality; and so on. Balancing all these aspects is a major challenge.

Despite the broadly held idea that digital tools are cheaper, quicker, improve data quality and easily scale, high-quality digital M&E might take *more*, not less time, and cost more. It will likely be insufficient on its own and will need to be combined with in-person approaches. At the same time, local actors have felt overburdened by an increased workload as they are expected to fill in gaps where digital tools are insufficient for the job. Budgets for training on new remote tools and methods are needed. Additionally, returns on investment in remote M&E could initially be low, considering that data quality is still questionable, and issues of exclusion and lack of representation are hard to overcome.

Some activities are, at the core, about presence. Remote data collection, especially on sensitive topics, is a challenge because data quality often depends on trust, context awareness, privacy and active engagement. Child protection activities, for example, can be deeply intrusive. When these happen remotely, the human connection is too distant for trust-building. Thus, remote engagement only goes so far and should not be relied on too heavily.

In conclusion, while there are ways to improve remote digital M&E, organisations should not expect these methods to fully replace in-person activities. They should also avoid unnecessarily prolonging dependence on solely remote digital M&E methods. There may be a tendency to continue with digital M&E to cut costs. However, most staff and communities appear to prefer in-person contact. Organisations should set a clear timeline to review and assess when to curtail the reliance on remote digital options based on public health expertise and in dialogue with communities, staff and local partners.

# Annex 1 Further guidance on ethics and remote M&E

## Evaluation ethics

- ALNAP's [Guide to Humanitarian Evaluation](#) takes an ethical approach to evaluation and provides a full overview of humanitarian evaluation. (Buchanan-Smith, et al., 2016)
- The United Nations Evaluation Group developed a set of [Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation](#). (United Nations Evaluation Group, n/d)

## Remote M&E

- CartONG and Groupe URD published insights from a study on [the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on information management practices in the aid sector](#). It provides a number of key messages and good practices. (CartONG and Groupe URD, 2021)
- The World Food Programme (WFP) issued guidance on [Planning and Conducting Evaluations during COVID-19](#), which establishes minimum requirements for remote evaluations versus desk studies and provides a set of checklists and flowcharts for determining when to conduct a remote evaluation. (World Food Programme, 2020)
- The ICRC conducted a [desk review](#) and [developed guidance](#) for remote data collection in situations of food insecurity and economic vulnerability. It includes case studies on specific types of approaches and tools along with their strengths and weaknesses, and a set of recommendations on conducting responsible remote data collection. (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2020) (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2020)
- The ICRC developed a report with guidance on working through [third-party monitoring](#) firms. (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2020)
- The Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN) Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) Coordination Working Group developed a guide with [key considerations for engaging communities on COVID-19](#) and tips for how to engage where there are movement restrictions and physical distancing measures in place,

particularly in low-resource settings. (GOARN RCCE Working Group, 2020)

- A [briefing note](#) from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) analyses how humanitarian actors are deploying digital technology to address specific challenges posed by COVID-19; how relationships between technology providers, governments and humanitarian organisations are changing due to the Pandemic; and what this means for the future of technology in the humanitarian sector. (Bryant, et al., 2020)
- Mercy Corps has created [guidance for their staff on remote MEL](#), including a list of alternative solutions to in-person monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) activities.
- Save the Children's [COVID-19 Program Framework and Guidance](#) includes sections on adapting monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) with a focus on ensuring child protection.

## Data privacy/data responsibility

- [USAID's considerations for responsible data use](#) note that there needs to be a balance across three areas: data use, data privacy and security, and transparency and accountability. The agency notes the need to uphold responsibilities to data subjects, ourselves and the broader community. (USAID, 2019)
- [Oxfam's Responsible Data Policy](#) lays out five data rights of affected populations: to be counted and heard; to dignity and respect; to make an informed decision; to privacy; and not to be put at risk. (Oxfam Great Britain, 2015)
- The Harvard Humanitarian Initiative's [Signal Code](#) frames affected populations' data rights as the rights to: information; protection from harm; data security and privacy; data agency; and redress and rectification. (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2017)

## Toolkits/guidance

- The [Red Cross Red Crescent \(RCRC\) Movement notes](#) that data is increasingly collected and shared across its members (ICRC, International Federation of the Red Cross/IFRC and National Societies), which implies a higher risk of over-collection, misuse or loss of data. (International Federation of the Red Cross, 2020)
- The [ICRC's Handbook on data protection in humanitarian action](#) covers in depth the various implications of data collection and use in humanitarian settings. (International Federation of the Red Cross, 2019) (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2020)
- The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) draft [Data Responsibility Guidelines](#) offer specific steps that humanitarian practitioners should take along the data lifecycle to ensure ethical and responsible data management. OCHA has also produced

several [guidance notes](#) that provide in-depth orientation.

- The Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP) released a toolkit on [data responsibility in cash and voucher assistance \(CVA\)](#) and a [case study on responsible data-sharing with governments](#) in the framework of CVA and social protection programming. (Cash Learning Partnership, 2020) (Cash Learning Partnership, 2020a)
- Save the Children has recently released a report on [Digital Safeguarding for Migrating and Displaced Children](#), which covers ethical aspects of humanitarian innovation, digital exclusion, exposure to harm in the digital environment, and digital data collection and use. (Raftree, 2020a)
- UNICEF has released a set of tools related to [Responsible Data for Children](#) that lay out principles for ethical collection and use of children's data along with accompanying guidance and worksheets. (UNICEF, 2020)
- WFP produced guidance on [Conducting Mobile Surveys Responsibly](#), which outlines the main risks for staff engaged in mobile data collection, and promoting responsible data collection, storage and sharing in complex environments (World Food Programme, 2017). The agency has also issued a [Guide to Personal Data Protection and Privacy](#). (World Food Programme, 2016)
- The UNHCR's [Data Protection Policy](#) provides an overview of the agency's data protection principles. (UNHCR, 2015)
- The IFRC has developed specific policies related to [legal and ethical use of biometrics in a humanitarian context](#).

## Data collection tools

- The Digital Impact Alliance has created [a list of open source tools to fight COVID-19](#), including some that can be used for remote monitoring. (Open Source Initiative, 2020)
- Teamscope offers recommendations on [8 mobile data collection tools](#) for research. (Teamscope, n/d).
- In 2019, Kopernik and Plan International created a [website that offers comparisons of various mobile data collection tools](#). (Kopernik and Plan International, 2019)

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