BriefingNote

Remote monitoring in SDC: challenges and opportunities

Remote management and monitoring have increasingly become accepted and necessary modes of practice for many humanitarian and development actors working in fragile and conflict-affected areas, where security risks are extreme. Through this accompaniment, the Humanitarian Learning Centre (HLC), which is a joint initiative of the Institute of Development Studies, the International Rescue Committee and Crown Agents, explored how remote monitoring is currently being used across SDC and the key challenges this brings.

Remote monitoring is a widely used and accepted term but understandings of its meaning and purpose vary. The following definition agreed in the ToRs served as orientation for this study:

Remote monitoring describes the monitoring of a) context evolution, b) implementation of programmes and its effects, c) performance and compliance of partner organisations in areas where physical access to project sites, affected populations and/or partner organisations is restricted or not possible.

Contents

1. Methodology

This short study is based on a number of key informant interviews (KIIs) and a literature review. The interviews were informed by the literature review and were all carried out remotely, using a semi-structured questionnaire. Interviews were recorded where possible and then transcripts were reviewed for emerging themes. This report combines the findings of the KIIs and the literature review, as well as drawing on previous, similar remote monitoring work by the project team.

The interviews for this review took place between October 2018 and February 2019. Interviews were held with 18 SDC staff from 11 Country Offices and Head Office in Bern, who were selected by the SDC core team. All recommended Country Offices were interviewed, except the Central America office who felt they did not have any relevant experience to share.

Interviews were also held with a range of other organisations, including DFID, UNDP, UNICEF, World Vision and Integrity, to compare their practice and understanding of remote monitoring. This selection includes key organisations recommended by HLC,

the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and SDC colleagues, with experience in different capacities including donor agencies, NGOs and implementing agencies. Inevitably, several interviews were cancelled or postponed - USAID were unable to speak to us due to the US government shut down, and International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Dorian LaGuardia (formerly Transtec) cancelled their interviews due to conflicting priorities.

The study is formative and qualitative in nature. As a result, the findings are not statistically significant and therefore the study has confined itself to terms such as 'generally' (to mean a majority of those interviewed indicated this) and 'limited' (a minority) rather than seeking to quantify in any greater depth. Where it has been possible to quantify further (unanimous for instance) this has been done.

The study is intended to summarise initial experience from across SDC, and therefore act as a catalyst to further policy initiatives, rather than being an in-depth audit of remote monitoring. The methodology was purposely 'light-touch' as a result.

2. Tools and approaches

Remote monitoring has become an established approach across the wider humanitarian sector in recent years, with significant investment from many donors and a focus on innovation and technology. It is widely recognised as an important tool for accountability and risk management in inaccessible locations. Outlined below is the growing range of different tools and approaches available to monitor context evolution, programme implementation and partner performance from a distance. This section draws on a literature review undertaken for the study as well as key informant interviews with practitioners, and where relevant includes SDC's experience with the different tools and approaches.

2.1 Third Party Monitoring

Third party monitoring (TPM) is the practice of contracting third parties to collect and verify monitoring data. This usually involves working with independent companies, but also sometimes individuals. TPM has developed into its own industry in some locations, such as Syria; by 2016 over 80% of CSOs reported that their projects have been monitored through TPM (Building Markets and Orange Door Research, 2018). It is a common and increasingly popular approach for many donors, including DFID, UNICEF, UNDP, USAID, and the World Bank. USAID spent approximately $9 million to support TPM in complex emergencies in FY 2017 (USAID, 2017). The World Food Programme (WFP) spent nearly US$3 million on TPM contracts across the MENA region in 2015-2016, and report that TPM companies

have been indispensable in responding quickly to needs, filling the information gap and providing high quality data through innovative techniques to gather information in hazardous areas (WFP, 2016).

DFID have also invested heavily in TPM in recent years. For example, DFID Yemen ran a major independent monitoring programme from 2014 to 2018, implemented by the British Council and Itad. The aim was to provide verifications that implementing partners were providing accurate reports, and that the aid was good quality and well targeted. It was initially designed to also collect contextual data, but this was later deprioritised. The second phase is currently being established, with a budget of £4 million over 3 years. This is illustrative of DFID's heavy investment in remote monitoring across their portfolio, with a move towards frequent monitoring and away from a focus on lengthy end of programme impact evaluations. The aim is to develop more accessible data and greater engagement with the process, with a key purpose of upward accountability when aid spending is under so much scrutiny from the press.

UNICEF's position is that remote monitoring should be the last resort but reported that TPMs are regularly used across their programmes where access is limited due to security risks or in large scale rapid onset disasters. Limitations to working with TPMs were noted, as the data collected is restricted and can end up simply for compliance purposes. The biggest constraints reported were limited in-country capacity and experience in data collection, high costs, and the heavy staffing required to manage the process and for quality assurance. It is necessary to work closely with TPMs to ensure clear understanding of the programme and humanitarian principles. An unfortunate drawback to using TPMs is a corresponding reduction in UNICEF staff attempting field visits, which are still necessary for programme success, when possible. However, the importance of TPMs as an accountability mechanism was highlighted.

Integrity is an international consultancy delivering a range of services in conflict, post-conflict and fragile settings. They carry out TPM on behalf of five Western government donors in Syria. Integrity echoed the challenges, limitations and success factors of TPM noted by the donor agencies. High investment in training and staff capacity is essential for quality

monitoring and maintaining a strong relationship with the donor is key. However, the relationship with the programme can be adversarial given the role as watch dog and needs to be managed carefully. Integrity feels that using local monitors who really understand the context and local language is a huge contribution to successful beneficiary feedback, but community visits need to be regular and to last at least one week.

Strengths of TPM

Some reported strengths of TPM in the literature include:

- Neutral, independent 'eyes and ears' on the ground where staff cannot go.

- Triangulation and validation of monitoring data from implementing partners, especially where confidence in partner reporting is lacking.

- Provides local, contextual knowledge of a situation, and local language skills.

- Useful for verifying quantitative and physical outputs of aid projects.

- Can be cost-efficient and thus allow for more frequent monitoring missions.

(Sagmeister et al, 2016; Integrity Research, 2015; United Nations, 2015).

Drawbacks and challenges of TPM

TPM is often the go-to approach for remote monitoring, as it is assumed to be the most neutral and impartial method. However, various drawbacks and challenges are highlighted by a range of actors:

- It is usually resource intensive and expensive. Increased funding for monitoring activities may lead to a reduction in funding for the project itself.

- Its objectivity can be compromised through the repeated use of the same firm.

- Means of verifying conflicting information remains limited.

- Aid agencies are often dissatisfied with the quality of data and reporting.

- TPMs often lack the technical understanding of the project to design effective monitoring tools, report in a clear and effective manner, and

often demonstrate a lack of understanding of humanitarian principles.

■ Inappropriate behaviour by TPMs can risk damaging an agency's reputation and weakening their links to communities.

■ TPM often require organisations to devote significant time and resources to make logistical arrangements for monitoring.

■ TPM often focuses on inputs and outputs but not necessarily on the outcomes and impact of a project.

■ TPMs are competing to secure contracts, which creates an incentive to report what the agency wants to hear.

(Integrity Research, 2015; Sagmeister & Steets, 2016; Chaudhri, 2016; Building Markets, 2018; United Nations, 2015)

There is limited experience of using TPM in SDC. In interviews for this study only the Pakistan office had routine exposure, and this was through its participation in the World Bank-led multi-donor trust fund programme. No SDC office had entered into a direct TPM contract as far as the research team could discern.

Whilst it is becoming a widely used approach by many other donors, several SDC offices expressed concerns about using TPM. Many offices noted that they have discussed using TPMs and are interested in learning more about how it works in practice. In particular, programmes in the Horn of Africa are exploring using TPMs, especially in Somalia where access is increasingly difficult. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is also known to use TPM in many hard to reach and inaccessible areas, but SDC staff interviewed did not have specific details. The World Bank uses TPM in Mali but doesn't share information publicly, and although the SDC office was aware of the practice, the results were not shared. Given the close relationships with the ICRC and multilaterals such as the World Bank **there is scope for SDC to learn more from partners, especially if there was clarity on how and when it might be used.**

SDC staff have both philosophical misgivings about TPMs and practical issues with how they obtain access. The high-level concerns relate to 'control';

most feel partners should be trusted, and they shouldn't be trying to ensure zero fraud but rather focusing on outcomes. Some felt uncomfortable passing risk to others and expressed concerns around the deals TPM companies have to make to gain access (for instance, if they pay bribes to gain access, or if there is collusion with parties to the conflict). There is also a financial constraint as SDC portfolios are rarely big enough to justify the expense of hiring a contractor to do this type of monitoring (the ratio of costs programme/ monitoring would typically look very high). When using TPMs, there are fears they might misrepresent the programme so there is the need to closely manage them and have very clear objectives. There are also concerns around the neutrality of TPMs, who inevitably have their own links to the community and could be compromised.

2.2 Technology and innovation

A key trend in remote monitoring approaches has been the increased potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and big data to support humanitarian and development programming. ICTs include a diverse set of tools to create, disseminate and manage information.

There is a lot of investment in such technological innovation currently in the humanitarian sector, and an aspiration to harness technology to improve oversight, effectiveness and implementation. In reality these techniques are in their infancy and relatively limited.

Digital data entry

Probably the most widely used "tech" solution for remote monitoring is where digital data entry fed into electronic databases replaces paper-based surveys to enable faster and more reliable data transmission and analysis. It can be used for surveys and questionnaires, registration and distribution reporting. GPS and time stamps can be included for verification. This rapid collection and transmission of data, including multi-media data, saves time as no data entry from paper forms is required. There is easier detection of abuse in data collection, and surveys can be easily adjusted and rolled out. However, physical access to beneficiaries is required, through partners or TPMs. Using smart phones or tablets can attract attention and raise suspicion with armed groups. Power and internet connectivity are

usually required, although software with offline capacity allows data to be uploaded at a later time.

Mobile phones

Aside from mobile and tablet-based surveys, mobile phones are increasingly being used in a range of other ways to gather simple data and disseminate messages, including calls, text messages and voice recordings, for complaints/information hotlines, verification calls and focal point reports. This enables direct contact between aid providers and beneficiaries in areas of limited access, and generally involves easy to use processes, and inexpensive devices and software. However, some common challenges involved with using mobile phones include issues around sharing sensitive data which could be intercepted. There is also a risk of bias, as the most vulnerable households and individuals can be missed if they do not have access to a mobile phone. Literacy is also required to respond to SMS surveys. Health data in particular is routinely being collected in difficult places (Chad and Niger are good examples of this), either by clinics texting data to a central Ministry of Health server, or by patients responding to simple surveys.

Online platforms and social media

The use of online platforms and social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook to communicate with beneficiaries and local partners has risen extensively in recent years. Where social media use is widespread it can be used for monitoring and feedback. For example, an estimated two-thirds of Syrians have access to the internet through smartphones, and approximately a quarter of the adult population uses WhatsApp and/or Facebook. End to end encryption provided by WhatsApp ensures that communications are not being monitored by other parties. WhatsApp numbers remain constant across international borders and networks, so this is a useful method for maintaining contact with displaced people and refugees. Social media can also be used for context scanning and monitoring, through analysing the traffic on sites such as Twitter and Instagram. However, there is a risk of bias as young people are more likely to use social media.

Remote sensing

Remote sensing through satellite imagery, radars or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs or drones) allows for observation and analysis of a remote area, which is very useful for context monitoring, such as population movements, or monitoring physical sites such as construction projects. No access is required, and visible impact can be compared over time/scale. However costs can be prohibitive and there are some technical limitations, such as radius of operation. Local communities, authorities and armed actors can also object to their use. The World Bank have invested heavily in this, and UNDP have started to explore it, although they have expressed concerns that the high costs and levels of work needed might not be sustainable. UNICEF are also exploring using remote sensing in Somalia.

A risk of using remote sensing is digital data management. UNDP noted that leaving digital trace in the hands of companies could be dangerous, as the same companies might work with different actors in the same context (therefore the possibility of sharing data with, for example, the military). It is important to encrypt all data and be aware of the risks. Remote sensing – like all such tools – can also lack context. Whilst it can be excellent for understanding atrocities in northern Rakhine State (as an example), it can be less useful for – for instance – understanding humanitarian needs, let alone differing powers and interests.

Broadcast radio

Broadcast radio is a common tool to spread humanitarian information or receive feedback through interactive radio shows. It has a wide and reliable reach, encourages local engagement and ownership, and is effective for awareness raising, outreach and advocacy. However, it is difficult to target specific audiences and verify who has been reached. It can also create security risks as it increases the visibility of aid organisations, and can be expensive.

Big data and crowd-sourced data

Big data refers to the "massive quantities of data that are now generated daily as part of the increasing computerisation of systems and records by governments and companies" (Corlazzoli, 2014). Big data analysis can support remote monitoring in three main areas: early warning, real-time awareness of events, and real-time feedback of a situation. A number of challenges with using big data include privacy and security, complexities of data and interoperability, interpretation and verification of data (Price, 2018).

Crowd-sourced data can be an effective method to collect or analyse a large amount of data, using volunteers who are enlisted online, for example to analyse satellite imagery (ALNAP, 2016).

There is some interest from SDC staff in these kinds of technological solutions, but because SDC focuses more on soft programming than infrastructure this is limited. Funding constraints are also a factor, and lack of time and capacity to explore new options. There is a general consensus that SDC are very much beginners when it comes to new forms of monitoring technology, and there's a desire to learn more. Simple methods to communicate at a distance are widely used, such as Skype, WhatsApp and SMS. In Pakistan, the use of pointer and interactive voice response systems to monitor project implementation is being piloted and has been recognised as an example of outstanding innovation by the World Bank. A simple but effective communication method has been developed between Lebanon and Syria SDC offices of using email accounts as a shared workspace and sharing draft emails to avoid the risk of emails being intercepted when they are sent.

The SDC office in Chad was very keen to see the use of simple technologies to increase programme reach – less remote monitoring and more remote implementation. A good example is education where very remote schools that find it difficult to secure teachers can use tablets for lessons, overseen by lesser qualified teaching assistants.

2.3 Participatory and community-led monitoring

Remote beneficiary and community-led monitoring methods include recruiting community facilitators or mobilisers to carry out monitoring activities. For example, an INGO in Afghanistan selects male and female community mobilisers (often married couples) to be the 'eyes and ears' for the organisation in insecure areas. They provide regular updates and photographs to report on project progress and quality. Community mobilisers are not direct beneficiaries, to ensure greater objectivity. Training in monitoring practices, and transparency with the community about the process are important (Chaudhri et al, 2017).

Photography is a widely used tool to support remote monitoring, and is often used in community-led methods. Time-stamping photographs confirms

the date and time, which increases their credibility. However, some caution needs to be applied, as training may be required to take useful shots, photos only show what the photographer wants to show, and photos cannot monitor complex or intangible outputs (Herbert, 2013).

Many agencies recommend finding ways for organising some level of face-to-face contact between senior staff and beneficiaries, to enable direct dialogue. For example, OCHA suggest finding ways for beneficiaries to travel out to a more secure location where a meeting can be organised, if access for staff is not possible (OCHA, 2013)

2.4 Peer monitoring

Peer monitoring (also known as cross monitoring) involves partnering with other agencies, NGOs or CBOs working in the same area to conduct monitoring activities. It is an increasingly popular approach to triangulate data and is commonly used by UN agencies. However, organisations need to carefully select peer monitors as they will represent them to communities and other actors (Norman, 2012).

2.5 Complexity-aware monitoring

Complexity-aware monitoring is a type of complementary monitoring that is useful when results are difficult to predict due to dynamic contexts or unclear cause-and-effect relationships and is being increasingly used by USAID (USAID, 2018). Typical performance monitoring can fail to capture three key areas:

- Outcomes outside those desired by the project planners

- Alternative causes of outcomes

- Feedback loops and non-linear pathways of contribution

Complexity-aware monitoring can help to overcome these blinds spots. It is intended to complement not replace existing monitoring systems, and to support adaptive management practices (Price, 2018).

2.6 Iterative Beneficiary Monitoring (IBM)

The World Bank has recently successfully pioneered IBM in Mali as a feedback mechanism to report on progress during project implementation, as an alternative to costly TPM. The mechanism regularly

identifies and quantifies biases and shortcomings that would affect the project. The main advantage is its relatively simple, low cost, rapid and iterative feedback loop that collects information directly from beneficiaries and produces brief reports. Data can be collected by face-to-face interviews, but where feasible mobile phone interviews are used. The programme has relied on enumerators from beneficiary communities who are trained and equipped with tablets (Price, 2018).

2.7 Learning and sharing for adaptive programming

Whilst monitoring tools are commonly used for accountability and quality assurance purposes, there is increasing interest in approaches which can also be used to strengthen organisational learning. UNDP's approach to monitoring is shifting from a focus on "proving results" to "improving results". Through adopting an organisational learning perspective, the emphasis is on what they can learn and adapt in order to build better programmes across the organisations, rather than monitoring simply for reporting and accountability purposes. They recognise that a key element in improved monitoring for learning is the human element - the managerial process and sense-making element. There can be a huge gap between insights coming out of the data, and this leading to decisions and changes. Therefore, the skills and capability of the programme manager are important,

to understand, analyse and use data collected effectively.

Learning for adaptiveness usually happens at the ground level, and there is a need to improve systems to better share the data and learning across the organisation at all levels. DFID Yemen similarly echoed concerns about the gap between collecting huge amounts of data and being able to translate it into real changes in peoples' lives, reiterating the importance of the sense making element.

UNICEF are investing in new forms of technology to improve their data collection and sharing, particularly focusing on qualitative data. Many country offices use different online platforms and struggle with the process of setting them up. A new data collection/ information management tool is being developed, which is intended to support more systematic qualitative monitoring of programmes and harmonise data across the organisation, to be rolled out over 2019. Currently guidance is being issued across all offices around how to use the tool, to build a common understanding of the concept, purpose and scope of field monitoring, and key methods for data collection and analysis. This new approach aims to bring some standardisation of qualitative data collection, while still allowing flexibility for adaptation for local needs. It will include the ability to triangulate data from different sources at site level while still feeding into aggregate analysis, real-time analysis of results, and quality assurance of the overall field monitoring.

3. Key findings - remote monitoring in SDC

3.1 Overview of remote monitoring in SDC

As illustrated through the varied use of some of these tools and approaches, remote monitoring is being used and understood in a variety of different ways across SDC offices. It is still very new and therefore quite experimental, and open to interpretation in terms of definition.

It is generally agreed to have three main purposes:

- quality assurance
- accountability
- context scanning

Remote monitoring is valued as a means to understand how projects are performing when regular access is difficult, and a way to ensure accountability, transparency and value for money to donors. In rapidly changing, highly complex settings, remote monitoring is recognised as a means to keep abreast of the situation to help to make informed decisions.

The term "remote monitoring" is generally used across SDC to refer to maintaining a good level of communication with partners and projects through different means where access is restricted.[1] However, there is a strong emphasis on the importance of

1 The interpretation is the authors, but this sentiment was in fact almost unanimous in interviews, albeit expressed differently from country to country.

preserving access and physical contact as far as possible. As such, there is limited remote monitoring in contexts such as Cameroon, CAR, Iraq and Sudan, as it is understood in the wider humanitarian sector where programmes are regularly monitored from a distance using the range of technological tools and different actors discussed above. Remote monitoring is not the 'new normal' for SDC, as is the case more broadly across the sector (Rivas, 2015).

Each country has very different monitoring, usually made up of an ad hoc mix of formal and informal methods to triangulate information. Informal methods are often seen as the most useful, and conversations with trusted partners and colleagues are invaluable, for example to get accurate security information and political updates in Iraq. Visiting projects and talking to beneficiaries gives SDC staff confidence in programme implementation, and also credibility when talking to other donors in capitals.

Context monitoring is recognised as being of significant importance, and SDC has given it special attention. Instruments such as the MERV are regularly used, to keep abreast of changes in the external landscape. It was noted that any new remote monitoring approaches will need to be integrated with the MERV, to harmonise results. Some respondents felt that the MERV is a static and lengthy tool and they would like to see other more practical approaches. A large degree of context monitoring is done informally, through conversations with partners and other agencies, and this information was relied on to be timely, up to date and relevant. For example, the Iraq team based in Jordan made use of SDC secondments to the UN for regular, informal context monitoring.

3.2 Maintain face-to-face contact where possible

There is a general consensus that remote monitoring should not become a substitute for in-country presence, and face to face contact. For example, the Syria office noted that human contact represents the core element of humanitarianism and losing it through a move to remote operations would compromise the SDC ethic and way of working. This view was widely and strongly held. Gaining access, seeing projects first hand, discussing with implementers and beneficiaries in situ are all seen as vital and key elements of the SDC approach. The majority of SDC

offices interviewed for this short review prioritise field monitoring and access as an essential part of their work. In many hard to access places – Chad, CAR, Cameroon, Iraq, northern Mali, South Kivu, DRC or South Sudan - SDC staff are getting out to visit projects, aiming to visit all of them if not annually then as often as possible. In this respect, SDC seems to have more access than other donors even in quite volatile contexts. Most offices use regular short visits as the primary form of monitoring, traveling when security and logistics permit in the most challenging countries.

In places where access is either not possible or highly restricted (typically areas such as opposition-held territory in Afghanistan, Iraq, northern Mali, Syria and so on), some simple remote monitoring methods are being used, such as using photographs and videos with GPS stamps to monitor physical infrastructure projects. In areas where access is not possible, such as Syria and Iraq, then a mix of innovative, *ad hoc* methods are used to maintain communication. In Sudan, access is a highly political issue and the SDC office is not willing to take on a project that they cannot visit, as access is vital to protect their partners. Maintaining access is one of their top advocacy issues with the Sudanese government. The Iraq office based in Jordan emphasised the desire to be more present in-country, for more effective programming.

3.3 Partnerships and trust

As SDC carries out limited direct implementation, maintaining and managing partner relationships at a distance is critical, and is a central aim of most remote monitoring activities. All SDC staff emphasised the importance of building trust and developing deep, on-going relationships with their partners. Establishing trust is especially critical in conflict situations, where "truth" is often the first casualty of war. All SDC operations in Syria are managed from a distance and remote monitoring only includes 'remote partnership management', with monitoring of the partnership rather than the outputs and high emphasis on collaborative peer-to-peer approaches. In Sudan, there is deep mistrust between the government and international organisations which impacts on SDC's approach to partnership with high consideration given to protecting partners from pressure and intimidation. In DRC, partners are highly appreciative of field visits in remote and challenging locations, increasing their trust with

SDC and consequently the flow of information. Many other SDC offices also noted that their role is not as a watch dog but to work with partners to build capacity to deliver better aid. As such, remote monitoring can be seen as a form of support instead of control, when this collaborative approach is taken.

3.4 SDC's role as a donor

SDC's position as a small, politically-neutral donor is valued across the organisation, and referred to as the 'Swiss approach'. This enables SDC privileged access in some conflict areas, including Iraq and Rakhine state in Myanmar. The Iraq team emphasised that greater advantage could be made of this status, to access even more areas with humanitarian need. Benefits of being a small donor include greater flexibility to respond to changes, and support small projects, which was noted in the CAR/Cameroon region. Being

able to access and visit projects can often allow SDC a greater voice in policy discussions than the size of the portfolio might imply – for instance in South Sudan and Chad, increasing the importance for many offices of the monitoring visits.

3.5 Opportunities for innovation and learning

Remote operations and monitoring can be seen as an opportunity for learning and innovation. Some SDC staff noted that more resources, in terms of both time and money, are often available to be spent in fragile and conflict affected areas. Therefore, the monitoring can actually be of a higher quality due to this increased attention. When working outside usual organisational approaches, you are able to be more innovative and thoughtful in approaches to programme management.

4. Challenges

There are a number of key challenges and considerations with remote management and monitoring identified in the literature and by SDC staff. Perhaps one of the biggest is the potential disconnect between donor and the reality on the ground. This can lead to data that is devoid of context, not necessarily helping to understand what the real issues are. A recent evaluation of the DFID remote management programme in Somalia and Northern Kenya identified this disconnect as a key issue (Integrity, 2015). The use of third-party monitors can also decrease trust with partners and outsource risk, with consequences for reliability of data and questions around how access is gained.

4.1 Community and beneficiary engagement

Engaging with communities and including the voice of those most in need is more challenging when operating at a distance. It is important to be conscious of local power relations and cultural barriers to information collecting, and triangulate data with various sources. Where local staff or TPMs do engage with beneficiary groups, it is not always a truly representative group. Children, disabled people, ethnic minorities, women, and other groups can be excluded from participating. Some suggested strategies include adopting more qualitative,

participatory monitoring methods, broadening the base of TPM key informants, and being aware of community "gate keepers" speaking on behalf of all community members (Norman, 2012).

SDC staff expressed a range of views around the extent to which remote monitoring can be used to capture the views of beneficiaries. Whilst this was recognised as an important element of programme monitoring, the general feeling is that operating at a distance reduces the level of beneficiary engagement due to a loss of control over the process. It is difficult to be sure that the views of the most vulnerable people are included and that the same people are not being surveyed repeatedly. If operating through TPMs, there are concerns that their links to local communities could lead to bias. Monitoring community engagement through short project visits is also limited, as it is very difficult to build a full picture. Most SDC offices interviewed expressed preference for an informal approach, such as informal conversations with local people during a low profile visit rather than organised focus groups with selected individuals (or often both, with the consensus that the most valuable information is often solicited after such formal events in the margins).

Effective partner relationships were highlighted as key to successful beneficiary engagement, as

the process is usually managed through them. For example, in Yemen some NGOs have set up successful remote beneficiary feedback mechanisms such as call centres for their own monitoring, which are providing useful feedback. SDC also supports partners to undertake qualitative and participatory research with beneficiaries. It was recognised that there needs to be a deep level of trust with the NGO, to be confident that feedback is not being filtered or interpreted. As remote monitoring relies more on local actors it can contribute to including the voices of the most vulnerable; close partner relationships of trust are key to such information being seen as credible.

4.2 Risk transfer

Remote operations and monitoring often involve a transfer of risk from international staff to national actors who are assumed to be less at risk for targeting. This raises some serious ethical concerns, particularly as national actors are often more vulnerable, have fewer security resources and less security training. Much of the literature argues that this assumption is often false, as national staff can be seen as outsiders if they are from a different part of the country, and can be at greater risk than international staff.[2] Remote programming requires thorough risks assessments and risk management protocols, disaggregating for different actors and geographical locations.

4.3 Accountability and risk

As the risk of fraud and diversion is greater when working at a distance and in violent conflict situations, control and accountability have become an overwhelming priority for many donors. Many SDC staff noted that remote monitoring is an effective method of financial risk management. Others questioned what level of risk is acceptable to donors. In situations such as Syria where bringing aid is so dangerous, is it worth assuming the same level of risk to enter the country, just to monitor how the money is spent?

Other SDC staff expressed concern that this trend is leading to a system of generalised mistrust, with too much focus on control and fear of public scrutiny of aid budgets. Again, the role of SDC as a small, committed donor was valued to try and counter this. Strict anti-terror policies can hinder humanitarian action, as engagement with armed groups can be unavoidable. It was noted that the Swiss are a good exception to such restrictive policies.

4.4 Reliable data

Triangulation and mixed monitoring methods are needed to try and gain a fuller picture, and a flexible approach. The SDC Myanmar team noted that all data and information will be someone's interpretation, whether its photos, videos, or reports, and reliability of data can be an issue. The Syria team observed that small to medium operations seem to be better able to gather reliable data through remote management and monitoring, as in larger organisations the process becomes fragmented, formalised and lost in bureaucracy.

4.5 Include other forms of knowledge including local knowledge (which is not readily available in English)

World Vision's operational experience of remote monitoring is that structured monitoring systems can place too much value on written information and not enough on local knowledge, which is often verbal, informal and not readily available in English. A key challenge of remote monitoring is to find ways to capture these forms of knowledge and give them as much weight as 'official' data.

4.6 Third Party Monitoring (TPM)

Specific challenges related to hiring TPMs including prohibitive costs and concerns around control, objectivity, technical understanding and means of verification are outlined in section 2.1 above.

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2 Statistics on incidents of violence against aid workers from 1997-2013 report 3378 victims worldwide, including 2786 national victims compared to 592 international victims (Rivas 2015)

5. Conclusions

Remote monitoring and remote management (RM) have gradually established themselves as normal practice across a range of insecure or challenging contexts. SDC has less experience of RM, for all of the reasons outlined above (preference for field visits, mistrust of third parties, perceived expense of contracts).

Nevertheless, this short review has identified a range of RM 'tools', including:

- ■ Field visits
- ■ Remote contact with partners/ partner meetings
- ■ Partner reports and data
- ■ Third Party Monitoring
- ■ GPS photos and video
- ■ Tablet based GPS surveys
- ■ Call centres
- ■ Remote sensing
- ■ Web surveys, WhatsApp, Skype.
- ■ Text messaging

Please see Annex 1 for a detailed breakdown of these tools and approaches, including benefits, challenges and recommendations for practice.

Whilst SDC itself has limited knowledge of RM, many of its trusted partners routinely use most of, if not all of the listed tools. On the development side, the World Bank are probably the most advanced, and SDC has direct experience of this in Pakistan. UNDP also use RM, and UNICEF have a range of field guides, initially arising from their humanitarian experience but in use across the organisation. On the humanitarian side, the ICRC uses RM but were not interviewed for this review.

RM remains a work in progress, and contentious for many both inside and outside SDC. It is felt that it distances donors from the context and the issues facing affected communities in hard to access places. This contributes to the phenomena of 'bunkerisation' noted in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Syria, where humanitarian and development agencies rarely get to the people they are supposed to be helping. For SDC, part of their credibility, and often their entry point into policy discussions is first-hand experience, which could be put at risk by RM approaches.

Where RM appears to be most the useful is in providing quantitative data, either on programme outputs in inaccessible areas or needs assessment, basic services data and similar information. Mobile phones, simple web apps and GPS technology can help with basic beneficiary and partner communication at distance and can be used to verify information (such as infrastructure, but also sometimes community consultation). RM does not provide context so could only provide an overly narrow picture without additional contextual framing. Used clumsily it can erect barriers between donors and partners, and communities and those affected. As with all tools, it is most useful when the purpose is clear and it provides information that is understood as much for its limitations as its benefits.

6. Recommendations

Remote monitoring is still in its infancy in SDC, and there are very limited ways for staff to access learning and knowledge around it. Many at SDC would welcome a toolbox on remote monitoring to help guide their learning and practice. Whether SDC is yet at the stage to develop such a toolbox is unclear. Perhaps preceding a toolbox, there is a need for more discussion and agreement around SDC's approach to remote management and ways of working in conflict.

Remote monitoring is not any different from 'normal' monitoring at core – perhaps this is the biggest single realisation that SDC needs to internalise. All that changes is the tools that are used. The purpose of monitoring doesn't change, nor should the way in which is it theorised – the only thing that should change is the reality that in some places some SDC staff will not be able to be present in person.

Luckily the communications revolution of the past decades has made some simple communication tools available that most people, even in the most remote and least developed places, either have access to or are familiar with. Mobile phones and handheld devices are at the core of this capability and this is where SDC should focus its attention. Other tools – such as satellite imagery – are periodically touted as being a solution but rarely in fact offer more than fuzzy photographs.

Once the realisation is made that remote monitoring is the same as non-remote monitoring in purpose, if not necessarily in approach, then the issues at hand are largely technical.

Data collection

If a normal monitoring approach demanded a quantitative survey – perhaps a post-distribution monitoring exercise, or a satisfaction survey – then a remote monitoring approach would aim to do the same thing. Typically, SDC would include this in a partner contract and so largely this would be up to the partner to organise. Typically, again, a partner would either use its own staff or more likely contract a local firm. Most quantitative surveys carried out today are done using tablets or smart phones using kobo, opendata or similar. In a remote monitoring set up not much would change, apart from the level of risk for the enumerators. Sometimes even this would not change much as those with access may be able to travel relatively risk free.

If a normal monitoring approach demanded a set of qualitative interviews, focus groups, key informant interviews, participatory workshops or similar, again the approach stays largely the same but the tools might change. Skype, WhatsApp and similar communications apps can allow for interviews to take place at a distance; workshops and meetings can be run by communities and reported through photo or video or over the web. Again, these are probably run by partners and they will probably find the optimal way for doing this given security constraints.

Remote context analysis and project visits

What is normally meant by SDC staff when they talk about remote monitoring, however, is the kinds of project visits that are detailed in this report. This is a critical part of the way that SDC works and gives the organisation a niche through its often in-depth understanding of context and partner work. SDC wants to be a well-informed organisation that can influence policy and practice through on the ground understanding.

Here the practice is not well established. DFID and USAID are usually paying third party monitors to collect results data – partly for reporting and partly in the hope it provides some form of accountability when checks are more challenging. SDC is not interested in this checking aspect of remote monitoring – or less so. So whereas teams of locals can check that goods were distributed using tablets and software for DFID and USAID, this is not the whole picture for SDC.

The best investments in new practice for SDC then, will be in the area of remote context analysis and remote 'project visiting'. Some investment in the more traditional remote monitoring of 'checking' also seems prudent as this remains both a need and a factor, although it is unlikely to be at a scale that will require a full throttled third party monitoring contract.

As there is a great deal less practice to draw on – either with SDC or in the wider community – in either remote context analysis or remote project visits, SDC will need to experiment. This can be done consciously through supporting various types of practice in these two areas across the fragile and protracted portfolio and periodically checking in as a group to see what has worked. Once again, the techniques deployed have to be simple, and will most likely be quite similar to non-remote monitoring. For instance:

- **Remote context analysis** is most likely to be done through commissioning either consultants, think tanks or partners. In this scenario the commissioned entity will be tasked with developing new and innovative ways of doing this, and involving SDC at key moments. These include a) inviting people who are living and working in dangerous or difficult environments to brief SDC and selected partners in a safe location, which can be a powerful experience for both those breifing and those being briefed; b) remote interviews; c) partnering with entities inside difficult to access zones; testimony or stories collected from those living in hard to access places (including video), etc. – there will undoubtedly be more.

- **Remote project visiting** is most likely to be done through web-based video apps. It is easy

enough to imagine a locally based partner project officer using skype video to walk an SDC colleague through a project site, or village, join a community discussion, interview a local official and in fact most of the things that might be done normally. Some of this is already being done (key informant interviews in Afghanistan by skype with local government officials), but doing it as a package is probably new. Again, this would be for the partner to propose and facilitate – there are obvious risks about filming in war zones – but over time and across the portfolio it is likely quite a few different ways of doing this could emerge.

Creating a bespoke SDC toolbox

Once SDC has experimented with its own style of remote monitoring, and piggy backed on others for the insights it provides, it would be in a much better situation to build a meaningful tool box.

SDC staff suggested that any toolbox would need to be very practical and simple, including clear examples, tools and concrete mechanisms, case studies, best practice from other organisations, risks and opportunities, clear do's and don'ts. It would need to be a living document, regularly revised to be kept current and evolving. All tools would need to be linked to and integrated with other instruments, such as the MERV. Such a toolbox should be included in-staff orientation and training, and also could be used to train TPMs. It was also suggested that e-learning around remote monitoring could be another useful method to share learning.

Learning and peer support

Several SDC staff emphasised the importance of peer support and learning as well as written guidance and tools. Many suggested forming a network of support around remote monitoring, to draw on for guidance and practical advice. However, others did note that they lack the capacity to be able to join more networks or spend too much time on learning exercises.

Recommendations for ways to share this learning around remote monitoring included via the intranet and peer sharing in country offices. Many were also keen to use this research more dynamically to stimulate discussion around approaches to working in conflict, and suggested including it at meetings and workshops at the programme, regional and international level. It was noted that discussion needs

to include top level management, up to the Board of Directors, and shared broadly across the organisation to include development focused colleagues who are also working in fragile and conflict affected states.

Balancing SDC's commitment to visit and maintain close contact with remote and difficult areas with benefits of exploring new techniques and technologies to develop SDC's own brand of remote monitoring

The SDC culture and practice in protracted, fragile and conflict affected contexts is in many ways commendable. Prioritising and seeking ways to visit remote and difficult areas when many other organisations are retreating into their bunkers is – in the views of the research team – in keeping with the spirit and the principles of humanitarianism. The degree to which Swiss neutrality can help preserve the humanitarian space needed for this approach is unknown but should not be relied on. Criminal gangs, radicals, poorly educated and ill-informed non-state armed actors will not necessarily understand the finer points of international relations nor humanitarian norms. But the approach of excellent context and security analysis to enable access is both well proven and reliable.

Whilst a healthy suspicion of remote management – meaning implicitly less contact with the intended beneficiaries of SDC aid – is laudable, **there will inevitably be benefits to exploring some of the new techniques and technologies emerging from this practice, and in developing SDC's own unique brand of remote monitoring.**

Before developing a toolbox however, SDC needs more practical experience of its own to draw on – real examples that are meaningful for the organisation and which will resonate in a way that 'cut and paste' from other organisations will not.

To do this, SDC should consciously invest in two strands of experience, 1) piggy backing on traditional contracts to understand them better and 2) developing its own unique catalogue of experience in remote context and project visiting.

In detail then:

1 SDC should participate in World Bank/ DFID style third party monitoring (TPM) contracts opportunistically to build practical experience in this area. It should systematically record TPM

experience, both by partners and where it can join multi-donor exercises such as in Pakistan.

2 SDC should develop its own practice in remote context analysis and remote project visiting. This could be organised by:

> » Remote context analysis: primarily through partners, consultants and think-tanks with an emphasis on their using innovative remote techniques to ensure as much insight as possible.

> » Remote project visits: to be organised by partners using video or video enabled communication apps for a range of interviews, walkthroughs and focus groups.

3 SDC should invest more in participatory beneficiary feedback in difficult to access contexts, possibly through and with partners. This could be complimentary to the output based third party monitoring being pioneered by others – potentially giving SDC insights into outcomes and impact, and also potentially of use to the wider sector.

Annex 1: Summary of remote monitoring tools

Activity/tool	Benefits	Challenges	Recommendations for use	Where used
Field visits Partner monitoring visits	» Face to face contact is important to develop trust and an effective relationship with partners » Helps to develop broad understanding of the project and the context which is difficult to get through other forms of monitoring » Can help protect partner from risks in some situations	» Access » Security risks » Obtaining permission to travel can be lengthy, cumbersome and subject to change » International staff may need to be accompanied by local staff, with cost and capacity implications		All SDC country offices
Remote contact with partners Using communication tools such as WhatsApp and Skype	» Useful to maintain regular contact » Cheap and easy to use » WhatsApp numbers remain constant across international borders	» Encryption supposedly ensures communications are not monitored but there are some concerns around this » Requires connectivity		All SDC country offices
Partner reports and data Regular partner reporting	» No access required	» Little means of verification » Limited if only source of information » Partners tend to report against the logframe not reality » Important information may not be requested or allowed for in reporting formats. » NGO partners can be very overstretched and onerous reporting requirements can affect capacity for project implementation	» Be mindful of reporting frequency » Coordinate with other agencies to harmonise reporting and reduce burden on partners	All SDC country offices

Activity/tool	Benefits	Challenges	Recommendations for use	Where used
Photos and video With GPS stamp, used to monitor physical infrastructure projects	» Easy to use » Inexpensive » Clear evidence of project development » Shows change over time	» Provides a 'snapshot' but limited potential for deeper analysis of results » Difficult to monitor 'software' – advocacy, participation, social change, etc. » Subject to the photographer's interpretation		Yemen Myanmar Afghanistan Mali
Tablet based GPS surveys Quantitative questionnaires via open source survey programmes. Can also be used for registration and distribution reporting.	» GPS and time-stamps notes location and duration of interviews, easy detection of abuse in data collection » Rapid transmission of data » Lower visibility for enumerators using small handheld devices » Enables the collection of multimedia data » Quick and easy to use, saves time required for data entry from forms	» Requires network coverage and power » Requires physical access » Technology can be viewed with suspicion, can attract attention and risk of theft or attack » Difficult to use for qualitative data collection » Requires skilled enumerators	» Select software that offers digital privacy features and offline capacity, to allow data to be uploaded at a later time » Coordinate with other agencies in the region to work with similar systems or standardise practices	Afghanistan?
Call centres For beneficiary feedback, often used by NGOs	» Works well where there is wide access to mobile phones » Gives beneficiaries direct contact and means to feedback/ complain	» Requires level of trust with the NGO that the feedback has not been filtered		No SDC experience Widely used by NGOs, such as Save the Children in Yemen

Activity/tool	Benefits	Challenges	Recommendations for use	Where used
Remote sensing Using satellite imagery for observation and analysis in inaccessible areas, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAEs – drones) used for close up analysis	» No access required » Visible impact can be compared over time and scale	» Expensive » Requires intensive work and capacity to set up and use » Risk of leaving digital trace » Can be difficult to understand full context through satellite imagery » Local communities, authorities and armed actors can object to the use of UAEs » Technical limitations such as radius of operation » Limited experience to date	» Be aware of local attitudes before using UAEs	No SDC experience Used by donors such as the World Bank, being explored by UNDP
Web surveys Beneficiary consultations through online surveys	» Needs wide access to internet	» Risk of bias due to self-selection process of participants » Used in conflict situations??		No SDC experience Used by UNDP and other donors
Mobile phones Calls, text messages and voice recordings used in a range of ways, including gathering simple data, disseminating messages, complaints/ information hotlines.	» Can enable direct contact with beneficiaries » Inexpensive and easy to use	» Risk of interception of sensitive data » Requires literacy if responding to a survey by text messages » Requires access to a phone - risk of bias and not including the most vulnerable	» Coordinate with other agencies to reduce survey fatigue for beneficiaries » Do not use mobile phones to collect sensitive data that could put beneficiaries at risk	Chad Niger

Activity/tool	Benefits	Challenges	Recommendations for use	Where used
Third Party Monitoring (TPM) Contracting an independent organisation or individual to collect or verify data	» Able to access hard to reach communities » Local, contextual knowledge and understanding including local language skills » Useful for triangulation and verification	» Often expensive » Can lack technical experience and understanding of humanitarian principles » Aid agencies are often dissatisfied with the quality of data and reporting » Concerns of neutrality, could be open to influence » Objectivity can be compromised through the repeated use of the same firm » Inappropriate behaviour by TPMs can risk damaging an agency's reputation and weakening their links to communities » Can require significant time and resources to make logistical arrangements » TPMs competing to secure contracts can create an incentive to report what the agency wants to hear » Concerns around transferring risk » Focus on control and verification » Tendency to collect quantitative data which is mainly compliance orientated » Can result in a corresponding reduction in staff field visits, affecting programme implementation. » Limited in-country capacity and experience in data collection can affect quality.	» Requires close management » Need for clear objectives » Training of TPMs encouraged » Anticipate the need for time and resources to set up and maintain effective TPM systems » Keep expectations and plans modest » Use the information collected to inform decisions » Strengthen security protocols and duty of care » Coordinate use of TPM and exchange on emerging lessons with other agencies » Include a clause in the contract that confidentiality will be ensured even after the termination of the contract, to protect beneficiaries	SDC Pakistan Widely used by many donors, including DFID, ICRC, USAID, UNICEF.

Annex 2: References, resources and further reading

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Resources

- » **Third party monitoring**: The use of third party monitoring in insecure contexts. Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) Toolkit:

- » **GPS surveys**: Kobo toolbox is a commonly used tool

- » **Remote sensing**: Orbital Insights, 'Measuring Poverty from Space'

- » **Web surveys**: UNDP 8th World Water Forum open online platform

- » **Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide**. ALNAP Guide. London: ALNAP/ODI.

- » **Technologies for Monitoring in Insecure Environments**: Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) Toolkit. Global Public Policy Institute:

Further reading

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This Collaboration between SDC and the Institute of Development Studies explores how poverty relates to politics and power. It is supporting SDC staff in improving the quality and effectiveness of SDC processes and operations focused on poverty. The Collaboration uses an 'organisational learning and change' approach to accompanying SDC activities, which is reflective, demand-based and rooted in the realities of SDC's work.

For further information please contact:
Stephanie Guha at SDC-QA
E stephanie.guha@eda.admin.ch
URL www.shareweb.ch/site/Poverty-Wellbeing

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
Freiburgstrasse 130
3003 Bern, Switzerland
T +41 (0)58 462 34 75
E deza@eda.admin.ch
URL www.sdc.admin.ch

Institute of Development Studies
Brighton BN1 9RE, UK
T +44 (0)1273 606261
E ids@ids.ac.uk
URL www.ids.ac.uk
IDS is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 306371.

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