Remote monitoring in SDC: challenges and opportunities (Summary)

This note provides a summary of a report (Briefing Note 10) prepared by the Humanitarian Learning Centre (HLC) for SDC in relation to an accompaniment on remote monitoring and remote management undertaken under the umbrella of the SDC-IDS Collaboration on Poverty, Wellbeing and Participatory Methodologies. HLC is a joint initiative of the Institute of Development Studies, the International Rescue Committee and Crown Agents. The accompaniment explored how remote monitoring is currently being used across SDC and the key challenges this brings.

Why did we focus on remote monitoring?

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. It is a widely used term but understandings of its meaning and purpose can vary. It is generally accepted to involve the monitoring of context evolution, programme implementation, and partner performance and compliance in areas where physical access is restricted or not possible.

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. Third Party Monitoring (TPM) is the practice of contracting third parties to collect and verify monitoring data, and is a common and increasingly popular approach. There is also growing investment in different forms of technology for remote monitoring purposes, including the use of electronic databases, mobile phones, on-line platforms, social media, big data, and remote sensing. This reflects an aspiration to harness technology to improve oversight, effectiveness and implementation, but in reality these techniques are in their infancy and relatively limited. Other options include more people-centred approaches, such as beneficiary and community-led monitoring through the use of community facilitators or mobilisers. Peer monitoring involves collaborating with other agencies, NGOs or CBOs working in the same area to conduct monitoring activities and triangulate data.

How is remote monitoring being used and understood across SDC?

Remote monitoring is being used and understood in a variety of different ways across SDC. It is still very new and therefore quite experimental, and open to interpretation in terms of definition. 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. This has three main purposes - quality assurance, accountability, and context scanning. There is a strong emphasis on the importance of conserving access and physical contact as far as possible, and a general consensus that remote monitoring should not become a substitute for in-country presence and face-to-face contact.

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. SDC's position as a small, politically neutral donor is valued across the organisation, and enables SDC privileged access in some conflict areas.

Operating at a distance inevitably brings a number of challenges and concerns. Most significant is the potential disconnect between donor and the reality on the ground, which can lead to data that is devoid of context, not necessarily helping to understand what the real issues are. The use of TPMs can decrease trust with partners and outsource risk, and tends to focus on outputs not outcomes and impact. Engaging with communities and including the voice of those most in need is more challenging from a distance. The risk of fraud and diversion also increases when operating remotely and in violent conflict situations, resulting in a growing focus on control and accountability. There is concern that this is leading to a system of generalised mistrust, due to fear of public scrutiny of aid budgets.

Recommendations for SDC

Remote monitoring is not any different from 'normal' monitoring at core. The purpose of monitoring remains the same - all that changes are the tools and approaches that are used.

This study recommends that SDC explore some of these emerging tools and technologies, to develop their own unique brand of remote monitoring.

This could include:

- SDC participating in TPM contracts to build practical experience, and systematically record this to develop organisational learning in this area.

- SDC developing its own practice in remote context analysis and remote project visiting, and invest more in participatory beneficiary feedback in difficult to access contexts, possibly through and with partners.

- This could be complimentary to the output based TPM being pioneered by others – potentially giving SDC insights into outcomes and impact, which would be of use to the wider sector.

Notes
1 This summary draws on Briefing Note 10 July 2019, 'Remote monitoring in SDC: challenges and opportunities' written by Lewis Sida and Louise Oakley from the Humanitarian Learning Centre (HLC).