

WORKSHOP SUMMARY

Remote Monitoring, Evaluation and Accountability in the Syria Response

27 June 2014

DISCLAIMER: This note reflects the content of a presentation delivered by Lewis Sida (independent consultant) and not necessarily the DEC's or ALNAP's views. The summary captures some of the key points discussed by the workshop participants. The summary is not meant to provide an indication of agencies' commitments on evaluation or MEAL (Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning) work planned or underway in Syria.

1. INTRODUCTION

The DEC together with ALNAP organised a learning event for agency staff working on evaluation, M&E, accountability and learning work related to the ongoing response in Syria. The event took place on 27 June 2014 at the DEC offices in London.

The workshop was attended by 28 participants from 16 of the following DEC and ALNAP member agencies: Action Against Hunger, Age UK, CAFOD, CARE, DFID, International Medical Corps, International Rescue Committee, Islamic Relief, Oxfam, Plan UK, Save the Children, Solidarités International, Tearfund, UNICEF and World Vision. One independent participant and Plan UK's partner, War Child, also took part in the workshop.

The **objectives** of the meeting were to:

- Meet peers and share some of the challenges being faced around working remotely with and through partners, monitoring, evaluation and accountability in the context of the Syria response.
- Seek advice and share emerging learning on how to manage, monitor, evaluate and carry out assistance work in an accountable manner in conflict and complex settings. Share and discuss insights into partnership approaches and possible monitoring, evaluation and accountability practices and tools that may help address some of the related challenges.
- Build on and deepen mutual trust and collaborative elements.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE LEARNING EVENT AND OVERVIEW ON ONGOING ACTIVITIES

This was the second ALNAP-DEC peer learning event on monitoring, evaluation (M&E) and accountability in the Syria response, the first taking place on 13 September 2013. At the point that the first workshop took place the DEC had recently completed its response review, and several agencies had undertaken internal learning reviews. However, the systematic incorporation of M&E was less advanced, as the major focus had been on scaling up programmes and interventions in a context where remote management was increasingly necessary.

This second exchange workshop was designed with a wider remit, given that agencies are now at a more advanced stage. Specifically accountability was included as a topic for discussion, and there was more emphasis on monitoring systems. This meant the emphasis was also different.

Whilst agencies' programmes have grown in size and reach, the context has continued to deteriorate. This is particularly true inside Syria in opposition areas where government offensives and the increasing dominance of radical groups have led to more displacement and greater hardship. In neighbouring countries, increased refugee flows continue to overburden basic services, and jobs and accommodation are major issues. Millions of people are in need in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, and whilst the humanitarian operation is the largest of its kind by volume of finance, it is struggling to meet even basic needs. Security concerns inside Syria have made access a major constraint, as permission to work in government areas is extremely difficult and in opposition areas there are risks of kidnap, arrest and worse.

During this second exchange workshop it was clear that many agencies have advanced significantly in the way they are monitoring their programmes, despite the major constraints of access and insecurity. There were a range of interesting presentations outlining different approaches and plans, and some good discussion about how approaches apply in different contexts.

There is a varied and increasingly sophisticated body of practice emerging on remote M&E, as well as on working with and through partners in the context of the Syria response. A range of approaches exist from quite technology-based to extremely people-centred. One of the agencies has developed a system for tracking commodities using scanned bar codes; another system allows for mass data gathering against questionnaires developed for tablet devices that can be uploaded to a central server (although there can be security issues with tablets, if people are found with them).

At the other end of the range another agency has developed a mentoring system via social media, and regularly brings staff out to a neighbouring country for further training and support. They also use a consultant based in Syria who provides further backstopping for staff on technical issues. They also see this as a long-term investment in capacity building. As this is a labour-intensive approach it is more appropriate to either very technical work, or work at a smaller scale, whereas technology-based approaches may lend themselves better to be used in larger-scale efforts/programmes.

Another approach employed by some agencies has been to contract out some elements of the monitoring system. There are sizeable cost implications to resorting to such third-party monitoring approach. Nevertheless, some of the advantages relate to drawing on established networks of monitors, and providing a degree of independent scrutiny. This needs to be tempered with ensuring

staff do not feel they are being checked up on. There is also a need to ensure counterparts such as local councils understand the work and role of third-party monitoring teams (for security reasons, since asking lots of questions can be misinterpreted).

For all of these approaches several staff reflected on the necessary first step of establishing standards for monitoring. This can be done through participatory approaches with partners (workshops), and is also part of capacity building efforts.

Specifically in terms of evaluation the ALNAP Secretariat gave an overview on recent inter-agency evaluative initiatives relating to the Syria crisis and response. Such initiatives include the work undertaken by the:

- IASC – Inter-Agency Standing Committee group on Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE); and
- **Syria CALL – Coordinated Accountability and Lessons Learning initiative** which brings together FAO, ICVA, IFRC, Oxfam, UNHCR, UNICEF, OCHA, WFP, WHO, World Vision and ALNAP and was initially developed by the IASC-IAHE group.

The rationale that guides the inter-agency evaluative initiatives focusing on Syria is twofold: firstly, the magnitude and complexity of the Syria crisis and response have been seen as requiring different approaches to evaluation and learning activities. Secondly, most agencies are already conducting their own evaluations and reviews, therefore the IASC-IAHE and Syria CALL members had to come up with ways to support evaluative work in a non-prescriptive and flexible manner.

Concretely, **four major activities/deliverables have been foreseen** for 2014-2016:

- The creation and maintenance of an **online portal** – the **Syria Evaluation Portal for Coordinated Accountability and Lessons Learning** (CALL) launched in 2013 and accessible [here](#). The Portal aims at facilitating collective learning by providing a single platform that brings together a broad range of relevant information, data, discussion and analysis of interest to different stakeholders – including those involved in operations, learning and evaluation and humanitarian policy.
- The publication of a **Syria Common Context Analysis** co-authored by Hugo Slim and Lorenzo Trombetta published in May 2014 and available [here](#). The aim has been to facilitate a ready-to-use common understanding of the crisis that could contribute to saving time and resources, and avoid duplication of evaluative efforts.
- The publication of a **Syria Common Evaluative Framework** (due in November 2014).
- A mapping of evaluative work on the Syria response (in 2015) to feed into a synthesis or meta-analysis in 2016.

The common Syria Common Context Analysis and Common Evaluative Framework have been designed to be part of an evaluators' 'starter pack' as they can speak to a broad audience of evaluators and evaluation-commissioning agencies from across the IASC and partner organisations.

3. CHALLENGES AND MEANS TO ADDRESS THEM

Prior to the workshop the Turkey-based monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) group was consulted by the DEC Secretariat (facilitated by CARE). Together they identified some of the main challenges in MEAL work, and in working remotely in the Syria context. These inputs formed the basis for group work discussion during the workshop in London. The present summary will be then shared with the MEAL group in Turkey as a way to feed back the main points raised, and reflections shared during the learning event. The challenges and some possible solutions are set out below:

Challenge 1 – Accountability

There are several issues agencies are currently dealing with, including:

- ***Closing the loop:*** how to facilitate two-way communication and act upon feedback received through various channels and platforms?

Traditional methods for communicating with affected populations have been either through project outreach or use of media such as radio. Both of these are challenging or impossible in Syria. There is also an inherent tension between the desire to be transparent and the security context in which information can endanger humanitarian workers. However social media has been a dominant feature of the Syria crisis and much is already being done in this format. This seems the most obvious way to increase communication with affected populations, and share information on activities.

- ***Minimum standards for accountability:*** what is acceptable for partners and what is acceptable for us?

The minimum standard for partners and DEC agencies should be participation in delivery. Beyond this there is a need for a phased approach. Complaints and feedback mechanisms are a possibility, especially once successful two-way communication methods can be established. In static services (schools, clinics) there is an opportunity for gradual improvement against feedback.

- ***To what extent are we responsible for partner accountability*** and where do we draw the line?

This issue was not examined as fully as the other two, given time constraints. However it was clear that transparency was a minimum, and should inform all relationships. There are also some core principles (such as impartiality) and issues (such as violence against women and girls) that are critical and ways to ensure partner compliance are challenges.

People and communities being served should have access to information about partner programmes, and all agencies should be proactive in ensuring this awareness. This is also part of capacity building.

Challenge 2 – Duty of care

What are the responsibilities of agencies towards partners, third-party monitors, evaluators etc?

Whilst legally it is possible to distance an agency from a partner or contractor, morally this is much more difficult. Agencies need to understand and be prepared for relatives or friends not to subscribe to legal definitions of risk; the implication of this is that security and care should be extended as far as possible. There are also many measures that can be taken in advance, including:

- ***Bringing staff out of Syria.*** Taking them out of the high-pressure environment. Specific training on stress and basic staff welfare. There should be a culture of openness on security and welfare issues, and agencies should be proactive in promoting professionalism with partners and contractors.
- ***Providing more structured psychological support.*** There are different levels, from psychological first aid training to one-on-one sessions with a counsellor. If not directly, then through Skype. Such support needs a budget; agencies should explain to donors why staff welfare costs.
- ***Create opportunities for trust and relationship building.*** Putting people in touch from different organisations, creating neutral spaces. Shared experiences can be powerful learning tools, and create networks for support.
- ***Security training.*** This needs to work on two levels – personal security adapted for context (even things like posting photos on Facebook can be risky), and management of security issues. This latter is important for small and new partner organisations.
- ***Flexibility of procedures.*** Agencies need to adapt certain procedures for the unique security environment. For instance not requiring people to sign their names to receive payment, if they are working in areas where such information – if it were discovered – would compromise their security.
- ***Insurance, compensation and emergency protocols.*** It is extremely important to think these issues through in advance of an event occurring. Requiring contractors to have insurance is one obvious measure, but this may not be feasible in all cases. Handling a major incident – kidnap, injury or death – will be less traumatic if there is a solid plan that can be activated. As above, thinking that theoretical legal separation will apply in a real incident needs careful analysis.

Challenge 3 – Complex programming through partners

With so many of the partners and remotely managed staff new to humanitarian operations, there is a sense that introducing complex programming (that may be relatively new to agencies themselves) is particularly challenging. The group considered some simple measures, and issues, that might be considered:

- **Small-scale, pilot projects.** This is what many agencies have already adopted as an approach. Taking a single sector for a limited time duration allows partner capacity to be tested and for learning experiences.
- **Review of capacity assessment.** This is not just about whether a partner is capable, but also how to provide the necessary support. Most agencies have taken a 'learning-by-doing' approach, blending coaching, on-the-job learning, peer-to-peer support and training. Secondments are another useful tool. With smaller partner agencies need to also be mindful of retention issues, succession planning and rotation, as staff who gain experience can find better employment.
- **Coordination.** In training, capacity building and piloting effort with other agencies and donors. This offers potential synergies and greater learning opportunities.
- **Support with recruitment.** Bringing in experienced people to manage specific projects, allowing smaller organisations to build a cadre of experience is another approach.
- **Staged approach.** Divide responsibilities – i.e. a mixed approach. INGO retains finance.
- **Consider not doing it!** Or doing direct implementation only.

Challenge 4 – Targeting and beneficiary selection

It is becoming harder and harder to differentiate who should receive and not receive assistance in a situation of overwhelming need. Employing blanket distribution in some situations may be a way of limiting community tensions. At the same time, beneficiary selection is largely on the basis of local council supplied lists. Does this actually target all groups or are there marginalised people who are not included?

- **Community-based targeting.** Several agencies are using this as a method and it has a good track record in other contexts. Basically the community develops targeting criteria and then allocates aid on this basis. This allows for a rational discussion about how much is available and consensus on who therefore should receive. Typically the process involves several steps, including 'town hall' meetings, posting of lists and some verification.

- ***Analysis of marginalisation.*** In previous contexts studies have highlighted where marginal groups have been excluded or targeting skewed.
- ***Equity assessments.*** WHO has carried these out in the past, although the context and expense may make it impossible. Such studies can be used to determine whether there is a need for blanket distributions, broad inclusion criteria (not entirely blanket) or targeting. Another possibility is using exclusion rather than inclusion criteria.
- ***Coordination to improve the access and coverage.*** With finite resources, the less duplication and the more cooperation the more likely we are to reach the maximum. This applies equally to national partners and well as international.
- ***Communication is key.*** Host communities are now often as badly off as the IDPs. Need to constantly communicate our efforts to help both, and to update our analysis (including assessments) to ensure assistance is targeted on the basis of need.

4. NEXT STEPS

There was general consensus that more learning exchanges of this nature would be useful, and that this format could be expanded to include people working in the region, or in other time zones. In particular, there were two concrete proposals:

- **A workshop in the region**
- **A series of webinars on topics of interest**