



Learning and Adapting during COVID-19: How are implementers and donors responding in this challenging time?

Monday, April 20, 2020

Q&A from our panelists

Sonia Moldovan, Director of Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, Mercy Corps

Q: Do you have any recommendations about the methods/tools that can be used with people who do not have access to technology/internet for collecting data?

A: Yes, Mercy Corps is exploring some different options including monitoring from vehicles, using community members or local partners. We also recommend that program teams consider conducting very simple assessments without engaging face-to-face with the community. These assessments should be extremely limited in scope and be focused on easy-to-view patterns such as what kind of people are out and engaging, are markets busy (what is being sold where), are people selling productive assets, are stores and kiosks open, are people going to water points? If program teams are continuing to engage with teams in person, the MEL team should provide them with a simple checklist style monitoring form with key variables and can supplement with photos as appropriate.

Q: Regarding the Mercy Corps Experience, could you share the technology alternatives you're trying?

A: We are not recommending that teams introduce any new technology currently due to the learning curve. Instead, we recommend that they continue to use ONA (Mercy Corps has an enterprise agreement with ONA) or Commcare for larger programs that do case management.

Q: How is Mercy Corps able to distribute food at such a time when people are working from home? Did you stop distribution of food?

A: My understanding is that some of our teams are still working and using Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). In certain cases, such as Syria, we use volunteers.

Q: In several countries, those in need cannot keep a safe distance when food is being distributed. Fighting has even broken out. Is there a way you manage this in a better way to protect the needy?

A: In the DRC we worked with local leaders to implement strict guidelines at distribution sites. This includes limiting the number of daily distributions as well as keeping a safe distance.

Q: What provisions were made for field staff in country? Have they chosen to remain in the field and if so, what are the stipulations around that decision?

A: Some of our team members have chosen to remain in the field since they live or have families in the communities we support. Their decision is based on their desire to continue providing support by implementing activities aimed at mitigating the impact of COVID.

Q: How do we balance adopting remote monitoring and getting quality data during this pandemic in regions where embezzlement of food aid is common?

A: I think we have to settle for good enough. Veteran evaluator Michael Patton's said it best, "Consider the 'good enough' standard of rigor. Detach from rigor as an absolute methodological standard. Rigor serves use and puts us solidly in the situation of doing what pioneering evaluator Peter Rossi called 'good enough' evaluations. Decisions are being made quickly. Some data to support those decisions when they are made is better than data that are too little and too late... For example, a smaller purposeful sample of interviews with a few diverse program staff and participants may be done more quickly, and be more useful, than developing and administering a full survey."

Q: Given the uncertainty of COVID-19 in terms of how long it would go, how are you working to ensure that regular performance monitoring data are timely collected with quality and reported in the long run?

A: For now we are only adapting monitoring activities for the next 3 months. We have postponed major activities including evaluations, annual surveys, baselines, etc. and we will decide whether we need to make any adaptations in the next few months.

Q: You mentioned that in order to learn hierarchy, it has had to be flattened. Or, where not possible it has become more democratic. Can you share some more about this? What barriers might there have been and how were they overcome?

A: I strongly believe that everyone contributes to learning. For example, drivers often give us insight and feedback on trainings and workshop since they are purview to follow up conversations with participants. In order for learning to take place everyone, from the finance assistant to the M&E officer to the Chief of Party, needs to be involved in discussion about what's working, challenges and what adaptations the program needs to make.

Sharone Backers, Chief of Party, Act to End NTDs East Ethiopia

Q: Have you developed any new messaging around Neglected Tropical Disease (NTD) activities and COVID-19 in Ethiopia? If so, how has this been delivered to communities? And was this developed in coordination with USAID (either Washington or the Ethiopia Mission)?

A: Not yet but they may be a next step and that will be in collaboration with the MOH and, I imagine, the Mission.

Q: What is the focus NTDs in Ethiopia?

A: Act|East is mainly focusing on trachoma and Lymphatic Filariasis/Onchocerciasis.

Q: In addition to supporting the MoH, how else is Act to End NTDs leveraging NTD platforms, such as for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), to respond to COVID-19?

A: Conversations around WASH/COVID/NTDs have already started happening with the MOH and as we move forward, we will look at the best ways to encompass similar messaging for NTDs and COVID knowing that WASH plays a large factor in healthier living

Q: How are you identifying and addressing gender specific challenges created by changes in the work environment, and the pandemic effects more generally?

A: For the women in our team, we want to ensure that they have the flexibility to carry out their household duties as well as the NTD work. The message of being realistic and managing expectations is one of high importance for us an organization.

Stacey Young, Agency Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning Officer, USAID

Q: What provisions were made for field staff in country? Have they chosen to remain in the field and if so, what are the stipulations around that decision?

A: In USAID, our local hires remain in country as do many Americans, depending on the post. Only some countries are on "authorized departure" status and just a few on "ordered departure" status.

Q: How do we balance adopting remote monitoring and getting quality data during this pandemic in regions where embezzlement of food aid is common?

A: Not sure about food aid specifically, but there is a broad range of remote and third-party monitoring techniques that many organizations are employing. The Pelican listserv has hosted active discussions around this, and there's a lot of discussion generally in the development sector about various approaches to mitigate the risks you mention, and others as well.

Q: In this crisis, I presume we'd want to see higher levels of donor integration in the way of programmatic implementation and data/evidence sharing etc. — all implications for CLA. Can you please share what donors are doing at a global level to encourage this?

A: The donors I'm in contact with are doing a range of things. Donors who are part of the OECD-DAC Evalnet are currently discussing a joint donor evaluation approach as well as sharing lessons and knowledge from past efforts. The donors in the Multi-Donor Learning Partnership are doing a range of things, including synthesizing knowledge that's relevant to the current crisis to share with their field offices and strategic partners; convening staff to share questions, information, learning and evidence; running scenarios to try to anticipate both health impacts and second-order impacts. Generally, there seems to be a mix of a formal response (that often is tied to figuring out how to reprogram funds, and is focused on the very near term) and a less formal response that takes the shape of individual units grappling with the implications of evidence and learning emanating from many sources for the programs they're responsible for. I would love to hear of an example of an organization that is doing a passable job at linking the formal and informal conversations, such that the expertise of the staff writ large is leveraged to inform the response.

Q: How are you identifying and addressing gender specific challenges created by changes in the work environment, and the pandemic effects more generally?

A: The spike in domestic violence and the burdens on women associated with their roles in feeding families and managing children in contexts of lockdown/curfew/curtailed movement --among other considerations-- are critically important. How are we addressing those? Not sure -- I expect there is discussion of this among gender advisors that may not be visible to many of us.

Q: Per the example on safe burials, local leaders were engaged in person (and PPE was readily available). However, given limitations on movement, the majority of community engagement will be done remotely during the COVID-19 response. Are there any recommendations on best practices for reaching local leadership for adaptive messaging?

A: Perhaps there are but I am not aware of them, given that these technical sector conversations may not be on my radar. (In other words, I don't know, but that doesn't mean those conversations aren't happening.)