

Helpdesk Research Report

Remote management of projects in fragile states

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Question

Please provide examples of successful remote management of projects in fragile state settings. In particular we are interested in who undertook the remote management, the results and lessons learned.

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1. Overview

This report examines examples of the use of remote management¹ of projects in fragile and conflict affected states (FCAS).

Remotely-managed projects are the primary mode of practice for many development actors in countries where security risks are high. While these actors may have evaluated these programmes, the evaluation reports are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the information. Similarly, there are few publicly available independent evaluations of remote management projects.

There is a small but growing body of research from development practitioners which explores the broader issues of project design, lessons learned and best practice in remote managed projects; these often refer to illustrative, anonymous examples. Notably, there has been a limited focus on project monitoring and beneficiary accountability. Most of these papers are self-published. There are few concrete examples of particular development actors' remote management approaches. Instead, most of

¹ The term remote management (or remote programming) refers to when development actors withdraw from insecure areas, but continue to implement projects in these areas through local staff or partner organisations.

the examples explored in the literature examine the general approach of development actors in particular countries, or particular remote management initiatives.

There are only a few peer reviewed journal articles; these tend to examine the broader political context of remote management. Overall, there is limited in-depth case study analysis of successful or unsuccessful remotely managed projects. In view of this, DFID recently commissioned and published a useful 'critical review of the evidence' of this policy approach by Schreter and Harmer (2013).

This GSDRC helpdesk report finds:

- The use of remote management in development cooperation has increased significantly in recent years, with projects in many locations including: Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, Angola, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Chechnya, and Pakistan;
- Remote management is generally considered a temporary measure which should be used only as a last resort;
- However, as security risks have remained high in certain countries, remote management has become a standard and semi-permanent approach;
- There are different forms and degrees of remote management of projects which entail different configurations of decision making and implementation;
- Key factors that can foster success in remote management projects include: acceptance of activities by local communities; effective staff recruitment, training and retention; flexibility in programming and budgeting; proximity to beneficiaries; visibility; mobility; and effective preparation for fast changing environments;
- The majority of the literature reviewed expressed serious reservations about the remote management approach, supporting the overarching principle that this is an approach which should be temporary and a last choice resort;
- Some literature recognises the benefits of a remote management approach in terms of training local staff, improving the understanding of local contexts and needs, and improving local accountability.

2. Trends in remote management

Remote management in development cooperation has been used since the 1980s, however in recent years its use has increased significantly. This has happened in response to increased development activities in FCAS, and increased security risks towards development actors (Norman, 2012; Schreter & Harmer, 2013). Such projects have been common in many locations including: Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, Angola, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Chechnya, and Pakistan.

Remote management has generally been considered a temporary measure which should be used only as a 'last resort' (European Commission, 2013: 3; Steets et al., 2012; Hansen, 2008). However, as security risks have remained high in certain countries, remote management has become what could be called a standard and semi-permanent way of working (Norman, 2012; Kirkbride, et al., 2007; Stoddard, et al., 2010). There are different forms and degrees of remote programming : Table 1 summarises how different approaches entail different configurations of decision making and implementation.

Table 1: Different forms of remote programming

	Decision making	Project implementation
Remote control	Majority of decisions made by international managers who have been relocated to a safer environment. Limited delegation of decision making.	National/local staff.
Remote management	Temporary and partial delegation of authority and responsibility to national staff following the relocation of other staff to a safer environment. It is assumed is that decision-making will return to 'normal' once security concerns have resolved.	National/local staff, national/local partner organisations or local contractors.
Remote support / oversight	A longer term strategy to hand over decision making and authority to national/local actors, while financial and strategic oversight is retained remotely	National/local staff, local authorities and communities.
Remote partnership	Significant handover of responsibility to local actors.	National/local partner organisations or contractors.

Source: Adapted from Hansen, 2008: 5; Oxfam International & Merlin, 2009; Stoddard et al., 2010.

3. Examples of remote management

This section explores a series of different examples of remotely-managed programmes, projects and initiatives. Where detail is available, the examples focus on the results and lessons learned. There are few concrete examples of particular development actors' remote management approaches. Instead, most of the examples explored in the literature explore the general approach of development actors in particular countries, or particular remote management initiatives.

UNDP remote programming in Somalia

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) operations in Somalia have been remotely managed from Nairobi since the 1990s, with a few sub-offices in Somalia (although the closing of the sub-office in Mogadishu in 2008 greatly limited the capacity of these) (UNDP, 2010).

In most of its programmes in Somalia, UNDP implements its projects through agreements with government entities, NGOs or community-based organisations (UNDP, 2010). Remote partnerships are most commonly used in South and Central Somalia. A combination of elements of 'remote control' and 'remote support' is used in Puntland and Somaliland. In all regions, monitoring of projects is carried out

by NGOs or commercial firms. UNDP also works with the Transitional Federal Government and its ministries to deliver its projects (Oxfam International & Merlin, 2009).

An independent country-level evaluation conducted by UNDP's Evaluation Office (2010) examines the relevance and strategic positioning of UNDP support and its contributions to Somalia's development results from 2005 to 2010. UNDP support provided during this period included activities in the following areas: Governance and Reconciliation; Rule of Law and Security; and Recovery and Sustainable Livelihoods, as well as smaller cross-cutting programmes covering HIV/AIDS, gender and economic and human development (UNDP, 2010).

In terms of results, the evaluation notes that: UNDP's contribution has varied considerably by region, and that this regional diversity was not sufficiently reflected in UNDP programming; some UNDP corporate instruments were not suitable for programming in Somalia; policy and operational guidance provided by UNDP headquarters was often insufficient or untimely (UNDP, 2010). However, despite the challenging environment, the evaluation notes that UNDP Somalia has a privileged relationship with the authorities and donors (UNDP, 2010).

The UNDP evaluation (2010: v) notes that the challenging remote management approach means that UNDP needs to 'ensure sufficient capacity to analyse and manage risks associated with reduced access to beneficiaries and to information, hence, addressing challenges of accountability and efficiency, as well as potential consequences of decisions and actions taken'.

UNDP (2010: 56-7) offers the following operational recommendations for future UNDP activities in Somalia:

- Establish mechanisms to ensure greater coherence within and between programmes;
- Improve decision-making and resolution of problems by increasing the presence of Nairobi-based staff in the field and increasing interaction with Somali counterparts;
- Improve quality of programme planning and results through: technical changes to design/implementation and monitoring processes; mainstreaming a results-oriented culture through training in monitoring and evaluation; reviewing existing management capacity; and undertaking a systematic capacity assessment of implementing and monitoring partners;
- Develop a gender strategy and implementation framework;
- More active and timely support from UNDP headquarters to UNDP Somalia.

Hansen and Stoddard et al. (2010) identify that the UN, and other donors, are less flexible than NGOs in remotely managed projects. This is due to donors' administrative and decision making structures which can mean they are slow to adapt to quickly changing environment. Also, constraints emerge from particular organisational security and staff issues. Hansen (2008: 2) argues that in Iraq, the UN is one development actor that has 'so far failed to adapt', recognising flexibility to be a key condition for success in remote management situations.

Monitoring of Tearfund Afghanistan's remote management 'Shura system'

The international NGO Tearfund's projects in Afghanistan include activities in the sectors: water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions, education and promotion; education and implementation of bio sand filtration systems; and nutrition promotion through home gardening and animal husbandry.

Tearfund relocated its expatriate staff from Kandahar to Kabul in 2008, in response to security concerns (Norman, 2012). The Area Coordinator is responsible for Tearfund's activities in the country. To maintain

its operations, local staff remain at the Kandahar office – and Tearfund has established an internal council system (called ‘Shura’²) to guide implementation, communication, decision making and as a means of project monitoring between the offices (Sourness, 2011; Norman, 2012; Stoddard, 2010). The Shura model is fitting with local Pashtu culture and leadership structures (Sourness, 2011).

The Shura includes five members of senior local staff, based at the Kandahar office, who meet weekly to discuss the projects and to share decision making. Minutes from each meeting are shared with the head office in Kabul, and both offices maintain regular communication by phone or Skype (Sourness, 2011). The Area Coordinator aims to visit the project office in Kandahar four times per year (so-called ‘soft’ remote management) (Sourness, 2011; Schreter & Harmer, 2013).

In an independent³ qualitative assessment of the quality of monitoring of the project, Sourness (2011: 13) explains that the Shura system and other methods employed ‘appeared to provide a reliable indication about project progress and quality’.

The evaluation concludes with lessons for developing solutions for monitoring results in remote managed projects, many are supported by other authors (Sourness, 2011: 18-19):

- Reliable solutions depend on staff capacity – continual mentoring and training of staff is necessary;
- A clear ‘roadmap’ is vital to monitoring, reporting and communication – this could be a project log frame with details of all project activities, monitoring, reporting, and communications;
- ‘Allow us to tell our story’ –practical solutions for remote monitoring may need to include creative, locally derived qualitative methods;
- Cautionary tales for using photos – photographs are a popular tool to monitor outputs in remote management conditions; however this may require staff training. Photos cannot monitor complex or intangible outputs;
- The evaluation recommends using the sense-making evaluation framework – Cynefin⁴ – to help staff understand the complexities of the development activities.

General international agency remote approaches in Iraq

As part of the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq’s ‘Focus on Operationality’ project, Hansen (2008) offers a broad analysis of international agency approaches in Iraq, based on consultations inside Iraq with a range of actors from international organisations with country-wide programmes, to small national NGOs working on single programmes in particular regions. Hansen (2008) argues that a number of these agencies have successfully adapted their operations in Iraq, particularly those that have developed cadres of skilled, competent national staff; and those that have decentralised most decision making to the local level, while providing remote support and guidance.

Hansen (2008) identifies the following factors, also identified by other authors that have been key to the success of certain development actors in remote management situations:

Acceptance. Development activities and staff need to be accepted by populations in the programme locations. The European Commission (2013: 3) underlines that ‘building acceptance remains the best access strategy’, to lead to an end to remote management. The ‘bunkerisation’ established through remote management can damage relationships and communication with local populations.

² Shura is an Arabic word for consultation or council

³ Commissioned by Tearfund

⁴ Explanation here: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin>

This acceptance can be established through proactive staff interactions and dialogue with local interlocutors, and through the strategic recruitment of diaspora communities or local staff to senior positions (Steets et al., 2012; Hansen, 2008). If recruitment and training of staff is thorough, remote management requirements can be useful in developing local capacity which can in turn improve understanding of local contexts and needs, and improve local accountability (Norman, 2012). Maintaining a highly localised, static staff is an important good practice point recognised in the literature (Schreter & Harmer, 2013).

Flexibility. Organisations must be flexible enough to deal with quickly changing environments. Less flexible organisations can be vulnerable to programme interruption if the local environment changes and programmes cannot be adapted in time (Steets et al., 2012; Hansen, 2008). This problem can be particularly acute when decision making is centralised, when communication links between the remote and local offices are not effective, or when local staff are not adequately trained. Budget flexibility is also important, and donors should be able to make increased funding accessible and flexible in emergency situations (Kirkbride et al., 2007).

Proximity to beneficiaries. Proximity improves understanding, communication and monitoring of projects, and thus can help reduce risks to quality and accountability (Steets et al., 2012). Hansen (2008) identifies that in Iraq as the proximity of development organisations to beneficiary communities has decreased the quality of humanitarian data, safe access and aid effectiveness has also decreased. He also argues that the feeling of solidarity between donor and beneficiary is reduced.

Visibility. The issue of visibility is contentious in operations in insecure environments. When development actors are security targets, it is logical that visibility should be reduced. However, to ensure high levels of local acceptance, visibility and interaction with local interlocutors is important. It is also important to reduce suspicion about the activities of 'foreign' people in the country, and to ensure that local populations can distinguish development actors from the national government, or military, for example (Hansen, 2008). There are many ways to ensure visibility which can be explored by development actors, for example: visibility on the ground providing services; visibility in the media; or visibility at national or political events like elections.

Mobility. In view of quickly changing restrictions on staff mobility, certain organisational structures can help to ensure staff coverage of areas of activities. Hansen (2008) explains an innovation used by various development organisations called 'staff focal points'. Staff are assigned to geographic areas and together form a network of cells or individuals that work together when mobility is good, but can work independently when mobility is reduced (Hansen, 2008).

Expansion of visibility or programme size. Hansen (2008) cautions against expanding remotely managed operations too quickly noting that often organisations struggle to absorb sudden increases in funding, staffing or responsibilities. Rapid expansion can also impact on project quality and staff capacity. In light of this, Hansen (2008: 6) suggests 28 indicators to help agencies decide on whether or not to expand operations.

Preparation. The literature widely recognises that many development actors do not have procedures and guidelines in place for remote management activities. Notably, the European Commission has publicly issued guidelines to country offices (European Commission, 2013), and Tearfund is in the process of finalising its guidelines.⁵

⁵ Advised by expert contributor

Issues to consider in terms of preparation include (Norman, 2012; Hansen, 2008; Stoddard et al., 2010):

- How to task in-country staff with decision making, implementation and monitoring;
- How to adjust decision-making structures to changing conditions;
- How to train new and existing staff at distance; and types of technology in place to maintain communications in challenging situations;
- How to ensure project guidelines and monitoring requirements are translated, easily understandable and appropriate to changing contexts;
- How to choose new local partners; developing local partners' capacity in safety and security;
- How to ensure appropriate sharing of risk and responsibility;
- How to ensure safety for local staff.

Other examples

Instances of remote management tend to be poorly documented and details sparse, but research identified several additional examples of successful remote management initiatives which may be of interest:

- **Mapping mine-affected communities in Afghanistan:** International NGO Clear Path International (CPI) is the largest provider of integrated victim assistance for landmine survivors in Afghanistan (Norman, 2012). CPI's head office operates from Kabul and uses ten local NGOs to implement approximately 300 project sites throughout the country, with an estimated 80,000 beneficiaries (Norman, 2012). The local NGOs collect data on living in mine-affected communities and input it onto a web-based data management Programme (called OASIS) which feeds into an interactive mapping system (the Information Management and Mine Action Programs - iMMAP). Staff at headquarters can then remotely view, analyse and adjust programme implementation (Norman, 2012).
- **Building relations with community groups in Afghanistan:** Stoddard et al. (2010) note that an international NGO (anonymous) has prioritised building relations with local communities as part of its remote management strategy. The NGO has established a 'community outreach team' composed of experienced national staff, and including a mullah (Stoddard et al., 2010). The team works with various constituencies in Afghanistan, and has particularly focussed on discussing the similarities between Islamic teachings and the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and other NGOs involved in disaster relief. This work has garnered support from the Ministry for Hajj and Religious Affairs and influential Islamic scholars (Stoddard et al., 2010).
- **Building relations with community groups in Somalia via diaspora:** Various reports discuss the innovative approach of connecting with locals populations in Somalia through using Somali diaspora. This helps in facilitating knowledge transfer between the development actor and the beneficiary constituencies, and particularly in communicating news about the development activities (Egeland et al., 2011; Stoddard et al., 2010; Steets et al., 2012; Schreter & Harmer, 2013). This practice has also been used in Sudan and Pakistan. Notably, Hammond and Vaughan-Lee (2012, in Schreter & Harmer, 2013) warn that diaspora may be 'resented by locals' and accused of 'being out of touch'.

- **Remote monitoring by photography in Iraq:** UNHCR has developed an innovative computer system to remotely monitor project activities in Iraq undertaken by local partners (Egeland et al., 2011). Following the delivery of outputs, local partners take pictures and upload them with GPS info onto an online database. In Iraq, 10,000 projects are currently documented on the database (Egeland et al., 2011).
- **Triangulating local monitoring in Afghanistan:** The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) has established a system of third party monitoring using three outsourced firms (two companies from Afghanistan and one based in Dubai). These companies provide independent staff who monitor and evaluate WFP activities (Egeland et al., 2011). In another example, an INGO (anonymous) uses a combination of vendors, local government officials, and community members to monitor project outputs and quality in an effort to triangulate local monitoring techniques (Egeland et al., 2011).

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