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SECURE
ACCESS IN
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SAVE

The use of third-party monitoring in insecure contexts

LESSONS FROM AFGHANISTAN, SOMALIA AND SYRIA

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Acronyms

ACTED	Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development
ADESO	African Development Solutions
BRCiS	Building Resilient Communities in Somalia Consortium
CHF	Common Humanitarian Fund
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
GPPi	Global Public Policy Institute
GPS	Global Positioning System
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IRC	International Rescue Committee
IVR	Interactive Voice Response
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
M&R	Monitoring and Reporting
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODK	Open Data Kit
OECD/DAC	Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development/ Development Assistance Committee
QR (code)	Quick Response (code)

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Summary

Third-Party Monitoring (TPM) describes the practice of contracting third parties to collect and verify monitoring data. In insecure contexts, aid actors primarily use TPM to monitor the activities of partner organisations in places where their own staff faces access restrictions. This report is based on interviews with commissioning agencies, TPM providers and donors, and a review of literature. It concludes that TPM can provide a meaningful contribution to the broader monitoring and evaluation toolbox by strengthening compliance in places where access is limited. For donors, TPM offers an option to verify monitoring information from partners. For aid agencies, TPM can provide a source of primary field data to inform programming and help verify partner reporting. However, agencies should do as much of their own monitoring as possible.

TPM works best when used as a last resort measure or in conjunction with recipient agencies' internal monitoring and verification approaches. Aid agencies should limit their primary reliance on Third-Party Monitoring to exceptional areas with constrained access. The practice of TPM needs to be regularly reassessed, and options for internalising monitoring should be regularly re-evaluated. To facilitate as much of their own monitoring as possible, TPM should always be complemented by acceptance-building measures, community feedback systems, and transparent communication with communities overall (beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries).

1. Introduction

For many agencies working in volatile contexts, Third-Party Monitoring (TPM) has become an integral part of the monitoring and evaluation toolbox, as it ensures a minimum of accountability where access using one's own staff is constrained. While there are clear benefits to the approach, critics emphasise that TPM cannot and must not be seen as a substitute for direct field monitoring by an agency's own staff.¹ Against this background, our research aims to contribute to a more structured and evidence-based debate.

We examined three main questions:

- 1. What has the experience with TPM been so far?**
- 2. What are the benefits and downsides of TPM?**
- 3. What is required to set up working TPM systems and to ensure that TPM provides a meaningful contribution to a broader monitoring toolbox?**

We conducted primary fieldwork in Afghanistan and Turkey (for the response to the Syrian crisis), including 59 interviews with 34 agencies relying on TPM, 15 organisations providing TPM services and four donor agencies.² In Somalia, the research was primarily based on literature and documentation from aid agencies. The team also reviewed general literature on TPM and remote management.³

¹ This division was apparent in interviews with donors and also during SAVE workshops in countries.

² All interviews were conducted anonymously. Guidelines used for these interviews can be found in Annex 1. Two consulted organisations are both users and providers of TPM.

³ Particularly useful was a recent report by the United Nations Risk Management Unit – Afghanistan (2015), entitled 'Third Party and Collaborative Monitoring: Findings, Opportunities and Recommendations.' For Somalia, the RMU-Somalia completed a similar study that was shared with the research team, but it was not publicly available at the time of writing this report: RMU-Somalia (2015), 'An Exploratory Study Into the Usage of Third Party Monitoring in Somalia'. Other sources considered include A. Donini and D. Maxwell (2013), 'From Face-To-Face to Face-To-Screen: Implications of Remote Management for the Effectiveness and Accountability of Humanitarian Action in Insecure Environments'; J. Egeland, A. Harmer and A. Stoddard (2011), 'To Stay and Deliver'; B. Norman (2012), 'Monitoring and Accountability Practices for Remotely Managed Projects Implemented in Volatile Operating Environments'; WFP (2014), 'Third Party Monitoring Guidelines'; Integrity Research & Consulting (2015), 'Cross Cutting Evaluation of DFID's Approach to Remote Management in Somalia and North-East Kenya – Evaluation Report'.

2. Scope of this research

Third-Party Monitoring describes the practice of contracting third parties to collect and verify monitoring data. In insecure contexts, aid actors primarily use TPM to monitor the activities of partner organisations in places where their own staff face access restrictions. TPM has become common practice for many agencies working in volatile contexts, primarily donors and UN agencies, but increasingly also international NGOs. Their uses of the approach can differ.

Used by donors, TPM typically serves to verify whether projects were implemented and whether they are in line with basic planning indicators. Often, third parties are commissioned to conduct infrequent visits to project sites (spot checks). But not all donors follow this practice: two of the donor agencies included in this study reject sole reliance on TPM and only fund projects that they can visit with their own staff. In some cases, TPM is also used to gather qualitative data from communities, but the focus is generally on verification and quantitative information.⁴

Aid agencies can use TPM in the same way in situations where they act as ‘donors.’ This is typically the case when the UN or a large international NGO works through implementing partners and wants to verify its partners’ activities. TPM is less common among small international NGOs and national organisations, as they rely more on direct implementation and may have greater flexibility to access field sites.

Based on the priorities expressed by SAVE learning partners in countries, this research focuses on the experience of select UN and donor agencies that used TPM to monitor individual programs in areas of constrained access. While the key purpose in all agencies was to overcome access constraints for monitoring, some have broadened the use of TPM beyond verification to resemble an outsourcing of their regular monitoring, including the collection of primary data to inform programming decisions.

Finally, and outside the scope of this research, TPM is also used by donors in an increasing number of countries as one of several components of elaborate independent monitoring mechanisms. In addition to collecting and verifying monitoring data, third parties in these schemes may assess existing monitoring capacities of partners, support partner monitoring, and aggregate and analyse data.⁵ These mechanisms were not examined by this research and the following findings should not be read as an assessment of this type of TPM approach.

⁴ See, for example, Amin Consulting Group (2014), ‘ACG SPAD Beneficiary Monitoring Full Report’ (report commissioned by UK-DFID Afghanistan and DANIDA).

⁵ Recent examples include the independent monitoring of five humanitarian response contexts funded by DFID, including Somalia, Syria/Iraq, South Sudan, Pakistan and Myanmar, as well as the Monitoring Support Project of USAID in Afghanistan.

2.1 Third-Party Monitoring in Afghanistan

For seven years running, Afghanistan has seen the highest number (in absolute terms) of attacks on aid workers.⁶ As a result, the overwhelming majority of international aid personnel are based in Kabul. Typically, around 90 per cent of agency staff are based in Kabul, and one or two international staff at major regional centres like Herat or Jalalabad.⁷

With their scope of access limited, agencies have increasingly turned to TPM in order to collect and validate information on partner activities in the field. A survey by the United Nations Risk Management Unit found that in 2015, eight out of nine UN agencies had experience with TPM and had contracted a total of 16 organisations.⁸ Today, TPM constitutes a sizeable industry in Afghanistan, with an estimated annual volume of around 200 million USD.⁹ USAID, for example, has spent more than \$242 million on TPM services since 2006.¹⁰ Actors consulted for this study noted that the overall demand for TPM is increasing. While no official statistics exist, the trend is confirmed by recent large-scale calls for TPM services by USAID and the World Bank,¹¹ in addition to multiple actors' interest in the approach.¹²

On the 'supply side', a broad range of actors provide TPM amongst a variety of other services. Four main types of suppliers stand out: international for-profit and non-profit organisations, as well as national for-profit and non-profit organisations. The distinction between these groups, however, is not clear-cut. For instance, some companies are registered as Afghan companies, but are owned by international entities or actors. Moreover, the distinction between national non-profit and for-profit does not always imply a real difference in goals and structure. New organisations are often being created on an ad-hoc basis to bid on TPM contracts, but sometimes do not have the financial capacities to subsist after the contract ends. In addition, the line between implementing partners and TPM providers is permeable:¹³ several national and international actors active in Afghanistan have added monitoring activities to their traditionally implementation-focused service portfolios.

In geographic terms, the service network is fragmented and unevenly distributed across the country, mirroring the concentration of aid agencies. Therefore, on the one hand, provinces like Helmand, Kandahar, Farah and certain eastern regions have only a small number of actors that can truly claim to have access. This limits the pool of partners that agencies can draw from, especially in places where they also rely on contracting national partners for the implementation of their programmes. On the other hand, aid hubs in the north and central regions have a wider network to choose from, with multiple actors offering monitoring services throughout.

⁶ Humanitarian Outcomes (2015), 'Aid Worker Security Database', <https://aidworkersecurity.org/>.

⁷ Stoddard, A. and Jillani, S with Caccavale, J., Cooke, P., Guillemois, D. and Klimentov, V. (2016), 'The Effects of Insecurity on Humanitarian Coverage' (report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: SAVEResearch.net).

⁸ RMU-Afghanistan (2015), 'Third Party and Collaborative Monitoring: Findings, Opportunities and Recommendations'.

⁹ Estimation based on recent public calls for TPM services put out by aid agencies in Afghanistan.

¹⁰ USAID OIG (2015), 'Audit of USAID/Afghanistan's Strategy for Monitoring and Evaluating Programs Throughout Afghanistan' (Audit Report No. F-306-16-001-P), pp. 4, 8.

¹¹ For example: <https://www.fbo.gov/index?s=opportunity&mode=form&id=9b12fc9a284c23065993f89d65bb2644&tab=core&view=1>.

¹² This is also exemplified by a recent workshop on third-party and collaborative monitoring convened by the RMU-Afghanistan in Kabul on April 22, 2015.

¹³ Cf. RMU-Afghanistan (2015), 'Third Party and Collaborative Monitoring: Findings, Opportunities and Recommendations'.

Table 1: Main organisations providing TPM services in Afghanistan (not comprehensive)

International for-profit	International non-profit	National for-profit	National non-profit
IRD, CTG Global, CHECCHI, Altai, Samuel Hall	MADERA	Sayara, ATR Consulting, ASR, RSI Consulting	SDO, AREA, OSDR, YHDO, APA

2.2 Third-Party Monitoring in South Central Somalia

In South Central Somalia, the humanitarian aid presence has contracted for many years. Today, the majority of international organisations are based in Nairobi and/or Mogadishu, and run their programmes remotely through partner organisations. This aid system was shaken up by large-scale corruption and diversion scandals during the 2011–2012 famine, which created significant accountability concerns for donors and aid agencies. Several UN agencies such as UNHCR, WFP and UNICEF have developed elaborate Third-Party Monitoring systems.¹⁴ Field access remains extremely constrained, and even organisations hired for monitoring rely partly on other parties to conduct actual field research. The distance between agencies, their partners and communities is arguably even greater than in Afghanistan, making TPM a vital mechanism for collecting and/or verifying data on aid delivery. Today, most donors and UN agencies as well as selected INGO consortia use TPM in Somalia. The Risk Management Unit interviewed six UN agencies operating in Somalia and found that five used TPM in some capacity. All donors interviewed for the same study have used TPM.¹⁵ As Table 2 shows, the vast majority of TPM providers active in Somalia are either registered in Kenya or other countries.

Table 2: Main organisations providing TPM services in Somalia (not comprehensive)

International for-profit	National for-profit
Altai, Axiom Consulting, Centre for Consultancy, Research and Development (CCORD), Coffey International, CTG Global, Forcier Consulting, Galway Development Services International Ltd. (GDSI), Integrity Research and Consultancy, Sahan Research and Development Organisation, International Business & Technical Consultants, Inc. (IBTCI), Polaris Global Management, Transtec	SORADI, Alliance for Development Solutions, Eagle Consulting, HATI

2.3 Third-Party Monitoring of cross-border assistance to Syria

The conflict in Syria, which entered its sixth year in March 2016, continues to present enormous challenges for humanitarian actors trying to assist people in need. The deterioration of the security situation for international aid workers in recent years has forced the majority of aid agencies assisting Syrians to work remotely from neighbouring countries. This research focuses on the experience of agencies working from a base in Turkey. In general, these aid

¹⁴ Risk Management Unit Somalia (2015), 'An Exploratory Study into the Usage of Third Party Monitoring in Somalia' (draft not publicly available).

¹⁵ Ibid.

agencies operate in a secretive environment and are hesitant to share information or engage in inter-agency coordination.¹⁶ Without direct access, they strongly rely on local partners and on TPM for collecting and verifying data for their programming: 10 out of the 18 organisations consulted are currently using TPM, and five plan to do so in the future. More recently, donors have been driving up the demand for TPM, using it themselves and also asking their partners to do so.¹⁷ While TPM can already seem quite expensive (reportedly one to three per cent of program budgets), certain donors have expressed a relatively high tolerance for monitoring and evaluation expenditures, which in some cases reach up to 10 per cent of aid budgets.

Compared to their counterparts in Afghanistan and Somalia, TPM systems in the Syrian context remain at an early stage. Many agencies are in the process of developing their systems, and donors are discussing with their partners which projects to monitor and the best methods to use. Even at this early stage, all interviewed organisations claimed that there is an increasing demand for TPM. Hence, the supply side is likely to grow. This study found a relatively small number of international and regional organisations offering TPM services in Syria, mostly from their bases in Turkey, in addition to a few global companies (e.g., IBTCI, Transtec). The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) provides monitoring services for the Damascus-based response, but not for cross-border operations that are at the focus of this research.

Table 3: Selected providers of TPM in Syria

Turkey-based providers

Aktis, BPR Consulting, CIMRO, IMPACT Initiatives, Integrity, Proximity International, Qatar Red Crescent Society, RMTeam, SREO, Syria Relief Network

Jordan-based providers

Humanitarian Monitoring Group, Stars Orbit Consultants and Management Development

¹⁶ Sida, Lewis et al. (2016), 'Evaluation of OCHA Response to the Syria Crisis', www.syrialearning.org/resource/21998.

¹⁷ Interviews with donor agencies.

3. Strengths of Third-Party Monitoring

Crucially, TPM enables an agency to keep an information flow to communities open while meeting basic requirements of its own accountability and results framework, and those of its donors or constituencies, too. When consulted for this study, every organisation agreed these were key advantages of using TPM.¹⁸

3.1 Eyes and ears on the ground where own staff cannot go

One UN agency with an interest in scaling up its future use of TPM described how the staff ‘cannot see themselves’ in many parts of Afghanistan and thus depend on, among other approaches, ‘external eyes and ears’ on the ground. As a proxy, TPM can provide opportunities for gathering data from ‘no-go’ areas, where direct access to the field is not possible for agencies’ own staff. Even in areas potentially accessible by their own staff, TPM can provide a low-visibility option with lower risks for communities and monitors, unlike highly visible visits of staff who need to rely on hard protection measures to satisfy security requirements.

3.2 Validating partner reporting where confidence is lacking

According to an online survey by the SAVE research programme, 56 per cent of international aid agencies working in insecure contexts reported that they are ‘not so satisfied’ or ‘not satisfied at all’ with implementing partners’ M&E systems.¹⁹ Against this background, TPM can provide a much-valued option for the verification of existing data provided by implementing partners or even the agency’s own staff. As one interviewee put it, ‘The turn to TPM came from the recognition of an increasingly difficult security environment with a large portfolio and a weak implementing partner’.

Echoing the interviewee’s concerns, donors and aid agencies primarily regard TPM as a measure for ensuring compliance and for detecting diversion or fraudulent behaviour.²⁰ While the outsourcing of monitoring activities can elicit scepticism, one donor representative noted that ‘TPMs have had a positive effect in that they reduced fraud cases globally in the Somalia response’. It is clear that independent monitors can help validate outputs and processes, even as the quality of the data collected and the level of accountability achievable remain disputed (see below).

¹⁸ In doing so, they confirmed results from earlier studies such as Integrity Research & Consulting (2015); RMU-Somalia (2015); RMU-Afghanistan (2015); as well as the conclusions made by SAVE workshops held in Nairobi and Gaziantep (2015).

¹⁹ N=112. See also Steets, J. Sagmeister, E. and Ruppert, L. (2016), ‘Eyes and Ears on the Ground: Monitoring aid in insecure environments (final report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: SAVEresearch.net)

²⁰ Based on interviews with donors and confirmed by Risk Management Unit Somalia (2015), ‘An Exploratory Study into the Usage of Third Party Monitoring in Somalia’ (draft not publicly available).

3.3 More-frequent collection of monitoring data

In addition, TPM organisations are often able to access field locations on a more regular and frequent basis than aid organisations due to more-flexible security arrangements. For some organisations, outsourcing monitoring can be more economical than deploying their own staff. This is the case where the organisation's own monitoring costs are burdensome due to high salary levels or elaborate security requirements. One organisation added that training and sending its own monitors to a relatively small project in a geographic area usually not covered in their operations was more expensive than contracting a third-party monitor.

3.4 Most useful for quantitative and physical verification

Currently, TPM is mainly used to collect quantitative information and verify output data. Agencies noted that TPM served as a control mechanism for processes in the field, rather than a means of collecting enough data for a proper quality assessment. TPM was regarded to be most useful for verifying:

- The total quantity of items that has been distributed, e.g., food aid;
- How many people were reached by aid, and who these people were;
- Asset creation and infrastructure development.

In general, the type of data collected by TPM providers is relatively simple, a fact that commissioning organisations attribute to the low analytical and research capacities of many providers and the difficulty of managing more-complex data collection efforts. Despite this general concern, large differences between agencies prevail in practice. While young organisations created for TPM will often have limited analytical capacities and experience, others are more experienced in monitoring. Especially in Somalia, providers have been active for some time and have gradually taken on responsibility for more-complex tasks. Location also plays a role, as aid hubs and regional centres provide a larger pool of skilled monitors than do those in more remote areas. More mature organisations operating in Somalia, for example, also have capacity development programmes for their staff that help overcome constraints in the medium-to-long term.

3.5 Verifying quality and outcomes is possible

Commissioning agencies and their partners seem to assume that TPM is not suitable for collecting qualitative data, or data on higher levels of results. TPM, however, can go beyond verification for compliance purposes; it can be used to collect more-qualitative data to inform programme adaptations. As one agency in Afghanistan noted, if sound indicators are in place, verifying impact does not need to be more complicated than verifying outputs or activities. In the case of hygiene-awareness trainings, for example, one could limit monitoring to determine whether sessions were conducted as planned (output). But it is also possible to directly ask questions to see whether attendants have internalised the content (outcome) or whether corresponding diseases have decreased (impact), even though it might be difficult to attribute causality. When one UN agency used this approach they reported compelling, qualitative findings at the impact level: they asked not only whether the outputs were delivered, but also how they affected the lives of communities in that area. Importantly, this method led to unexpected insights on local tensions and dynamics surrounding implementation that allowed the agency to adjust programming. As this example demonstrates, the capacities of TPM providers do not necessarily limit the type of data to be collected – either to only qualitative or only quantitative. In every case, though, it is crucial that research tools and templates are well understood by field monitors.

CASE STUDY: WFP'S EXPERIENCE WITH TPM IN AFGHANISTAN

Since early pilots with Programme Assistant Teams (PATs) in 2008, WFP has collected a wealth of TPM experience in Afghanistan. At the peak, in mid-2012, a total of 143 PATs from six different service providers were working for WFP in the field, with a budget of \$2.5 million a year.²¹ An evaluation from 2012 shows that the initial learning curve was steep: WFP made significant investments in the **selection, training, and management** of TPM providers. Before that, there were high rates of staff turnover in high-risk areas, clear capacity issues, disputes over salary levels, and WFP struggled to recruit female PAT monitors.

Today, WFP uses elaborate benchmarks to select monitoring providers. Field Level Agreements, which determine standard salary rates, are then signed with TPM providers. WFP is also closely involved in the recruitment of field monitors: 'When we recruit the PAT monitor, we need WFP staff and sub-office staff to be there in the recruitment office', said one staff member.

WFP handles training as well, which involves units on M&E, vulnerability-mapping and program-specific topics. The Country Office's M&E unit collaborates with each area office to train all PAT monitors at least once a year.

Moreover, the overall management of PATs has become more intense and elaborate. In the area offices, one person spends most of his or her time managing daily relations with PATs. Office coordinators and PAT managers meet at the office and talk about the monitoring plan once a month. Updates are received weekly, and narrative (qualitative) reports are submitted monthly. Additionally, random spot checks are carried out to confirm that monitors have actually visited sites, as agreed upon in sampling tables.

WFP uses 108 PAT monitors from two private consulting firms and two NGOs (Afghan and international) to help monitor programmes in 33 provinces – thus extending WFP's access significantly. So far, PATs have been used for process monitoring of school feeding programmes, asset creation and food-for-training activities. Nevertheless, there are limits and challenges: 'When [the task] becomes too technical, we tend to not only depend on PATs. While we can send them to monitor the food distribution and implementation (outputs), we are less likely to ask them to assess technical quality', a staff member said. Furthermore, turnover at the field level is still high, and training needs to be repeated frequently to compensate for 'brain drain', which happens when monitors find jobs with the government or other agencies.²² Finally, agencies are still hard-pressed to find senior female monitors to enter clinics, interview mothers, or to access female vocational training centres – both places where men cannot go. To address this challenge, WFP has started to allow female monitors to move with their *mahram* (male relatives).

Despite substantial investments and learning since 2008, challenges remain, and significant investments are still needed. Even with these issues, WFP is satisfied with its PAT system overall.

²¹ Johnston, H. (2013), 'Humanitarian negotiations in Afghanistan: WFP's experience', *Humanitarian Exchange* 58, p. 15.

²² While this requires additional investments from the agencies' point of view, local capacity is arguably being developed in the process and is likely to have a positive overall impact.

4. Constraints and risks of Third-Party Monitoring

While the potential benefits of TPM seemed relatively clear to most agencies consulted for this research, interviews confirmed that the current practice remains far from ‘roses all the way’, as one respondent put it. This section reviews the shortcomings and trade-offs that should be considered before and during the use of TPM.

4.1 Quality of reporting

Satisfaction with the existing analysis and reporting capacities of TPM providers is mixed. When agencies in Afghanistan were asked to rate the credibility and robustness of monitoring data (taking into account the low standards of data collection in the country), most rated TPM providers between 5 and 7 out of 10. Almost all agencies reported frequent experiences with irregularities in data collected – for example, data from areas where monitors had not been present or data that contradicted the agency’s own knowledge and observations.²³

In Syria, M&E staff consulted were slightly more satisfied, giving an average score of 7. The vast majority of TPM users in Syria were very confident with the output-related data received from TPM providers. However, there was wide variation in the quality of more qualitative data and low trust in providers’ understanding of interviewing methods and sampling techniques. Moreover, English to Arabic (or from one Arabic dialect to another) translation was reported to be difficult and a frequent source of errors. Research on TPM in Somalia describes similar concerns, particularly with regard to reports from local TPM providers.²⁴

Overall, written reports produced by monitoring providers were often found to be unsatisfactory,²⁵ and commenting on and/or refining written documents with external partners proved problematic in multiple instances. Those managing data collection frequently were not familiar enough with the larger project framework, theories of change or rationale behind certain indicators to detect flaws or collect the most relevant information. Similarly, the quality and precision of statistical analysis were often viewed as lacking. Unsurprisingly, these reported shortcomings had a negative impact on agencies’ confidence in third-party collected data in comparison with data from their own staff.

To guard against these pitfalls, agencies consulted have applied different strategies for quality assurance. One actor reported positive experiences with hiring a consultant as an intermediary responsible for checking and cleaning data, and managing the data collection process. Others increasingly rely on technology such as GPS-stamped pictures or tracking systems for field staff and monitors. Where lack of capacity or associated security risks prevent the use of technology, some agencies are applying systematic triangulation with multiple teams. One described a system in which staff from government departments, implementing partners and monitoring partners triangulate data and validate who was where.

²³ Similar experiences are described in United Nations Risk Management Unit – Afghanistan (2015), ‘Third Party and Collaborative Monitoring: Findings, Opportunities and Recommendations’.

²⁴ Risk Management Unit Somalia (2015), ‘An Exploratory Study into the Usage of Third Party Monitoring in Somalia’ (draft not publicly available).

²⁵ In Afghanistan, 50 per cent of users reported problems with written reports from TPM.

4.2 Reputational risks

Sending out third-party monitors in the field carries risks: their actions can detrimentally affect the reputation and acceptance of commissioning agencies and their partners. While TPM providers consulted maintained that their staff introduce themselves as independent from the contracting agency, staff from these agencies said that field monitors rarely respect this rule. As one interviewee put it, 'We try to make sure that monitors present themselves as separate, but many times in the field, I observed that the field staff uses our name, simply because it is easier for the communities to recognise'. If monitors do not respect humanitarian principles or behave in ways that contradict organisational policies of the commissioning agency, they can inadvertently damage the agency's reputation, an especially worrisome outcome for humanitarian agencies.

Giving credibility to this fear, interviews conducted with TPM providers revealed a low understanding of humanitarian principles across all types of organisations. Most agencies also acknowledged that equipping monitoring providers with at least a basic understanding of their mandate and key principles was not very high on the list of briefing or training priorities.

4.3 Required investments of time and resources

What is the real cost of TPM? Different estimates by stakeholders consulted for this study and previous studies put the cost of a single monitoring visit by an Afghan field monitor between \$2,000 and \$4,000.²⁶ Donor agencies that use TPM and were consulted for this study reported allocating between three and five per cent of their budgets to TPM. But such estimations should be interpreted with caution. The exact cost of TPM depends on the type of project being monitored and, more significantly, the type of provider selected by the agency, its overhead and salary level. Rather than paying per monitoring activity, agencies using TPM services generally sign framework or flat-rate agreements with monitoring providers that include a range of services such as assessments, evaluation visits and monitoring.

While time and cost varied from agency to agency, one pattern stood out: commissioning organisations initially underestimated the time and resources required in all three contexts in question. First, contracting monitors in line with internal procurement regulations typically took agencies between two and four months, in some cases even longer. A signed contract is often then required in order for third-party monitors to start recruiting field monitors. This process can further delay the start of monitoring activities, especially where specific skills are required. Second, it cannot be readily assumed that adequate training of monitors will be provided by the monitoring organisation alone. For this reason, one commissioning organisation reported that it closely involves itself in the process and conducts trainings together with monitoring providers. Given the relatively high turnover, these training efforts must be repeated regularly. Third, all agencies recognised the need to invest significant time and resources in triangulating and cross-checking the monitoring data received. In order to use the data with a satisfactory level of confidence, systems to 'monitor the monitors' had to be set up. Finally, it can be challenging to feed data coming from external sources into an agency's existing information management system. In Somalia, the DFID evaluation found that agencies sometimes wanted more data,²⁷ but had not thought about how to systematically use the additional information to strengthen programming. One agency consulted for this study reported that it took about a year to establish a system robust enough to make sufficient use of the data.

²⁶ Cf. Schumacher (2013), 'Review of Issues for DFID Monitoring in Afghanistan post the 2014 Transition' (unpublished report commissioned by DFID-Afghanistan).

²⁷ Integrity Research & Consulting (2015), 'Cross Cutting Evaluation of DFID's Approach to Remote Management in Somalia and North-East Kenya - Evaluation Report'.

4.4 Potential conflicts of interest and trade-offs

In practice, Third-Party Monitoring can sometimes lead to trade-offs and conflicts of interest. There are two ways this can happen: First, field monitors with the highest level of access to a given area often rely on local networks and are part of the local socio-political context. There are some indications that the more integrated they are, the less likely they are to report critical issues concerning corruption or wrongdoing, for fear of negative impact on their access or personal safety. Second, where monitors are deployed to the same project sites time and again, their independence can be compromised. For example, one NGO in Syria reported that its monitors became biased as their ties with bakery owners, the recipients of large-scale flour distributions, strengthened. The NGO considered contracting third-party monitors to address the issue. But our interviews with TPM providers reveal that third-party monitors are likely to experience a similar bias over time. (This became a systemic concern in Somalia, where TPM has a longer history.)

Bias can also appear when organisations engage in cross-monitoring (sometimes referred to as ‘peer monitoring’). Under this system, an implementing partner for one activity is responsible for monitoring the implementation of a different activity conducted by another implementing partner of the same commissioning agency – and vice versa. Interviewees expressed concerns that this practice can cause organisations to be either overly critical of their (actual or potential) competitors or, to the contrary, less critical of peer organisations. This issue was also identified in the Somalia evaluation.²⁸ While this study could not empirically verify this effect, and no first-hand evidence was collected, consultations with TPM providers in Afghanistan suggest a high level of competition and readiness to point out problems in competing organisations.

4.5 Fluidity of access

Organisations view access level as an important selection criterion and an assumed advantage of using third-party monitors. A major lesson shared by actors consulted for this study, however, is that the actual level of access is extremely difficult to assess. Organisations bidding for monitoring contracts see an incentive to inflating their level of access, and many commissioning agencies found the real level of access to be lower than initially expected. In the words of an interviewee, ‘Some of our partners claimed to have access, but then we realised that they were afraid to go to Taliban-controlled areas or ISIS-controlled areas’. Others underestimated the fact that past access is by no means a guarantee for future access to a given area, as conditions can change dynamically and from project to project.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that monitoring providers are not immune to the larger challenges of data collection in countries like Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia. Most TPM providers interviewed for this study, for example, acknowledged that it was difficult or impossible to send female enumerators to the field, despite the repeated requests of aid agencies to deploy mixed monitoring teams.

4.6 Ethical concerns and risk transfer

A transfer of risk from commissioning agencies to monitors is a frequently cited, but generally tolerated consequence of TPM arrangements. As one interviewee put it, ‘I think you have to be honest and acknowledge that there is definitely a transfer of risks’. Of all the contracting agencies consulted, only one has accounted for the risk transfer in its own procedures and assumed responsibility for the security of monitoring missions: In this case, monitoring plans

²⁸ *Ibid.*

were shared with the respective focal point and required approval. Then security staff and field offices were responsible for security assessments before monitors embarked on their field missions. Finally, the agency shared advice and security information with monitors in a formalised way (other agencies have reported that they share security-relevant information on an ad-hoc, informal basis with their monitors). More commonly, contracting agencies assume that TPM providers have their own internal procedures and risk mitigation measures in place, and that they require less elaborate systems due to their local networks and community acceptance. For the majority of TPM providers consulted, this study found no evidence that they had robust security procedures in place or any dedicated staff for security management. Reportedly, most of their field staff do not receive security training. TPM providers interviewed noted that at most, they discuss appropriate behaviour and clothing before going to 'dangerous areas'. Additional strategies reported by TPM partners include:

- Relying, to the extent possible, on staff from the area;
- Contacting district and local authorities for updates on the security situation in an area;
- When possible, talking to community elders before going to the field to get information and to get their protection while in the field;
- Using discreet means of transportation and keeping a low profile.

At the same time, all but one TPM provider interviewed for this study had experienced a serious incident (kidnappings and killings) or, at the very least, threats to that effect against their field workers. To cope with these threats, some monitors employ the same tactics as local staff, such as concealing their identity at checkpoints. Others expressed fears of traveling by road in very volatile districts, such as the Faryab Province in Afghanistan. The general level of acceptance of the risks among professional monitors is relatively high – often beyond the thresholds of their contracting agencies. The precarious economic conditions that many field monitors find themselves in can further aggravate risk transfer. In a highly competitive market, they face incentives to overestimate and overstate their own capabilities, and to underreport security incidents. One interviewee said, 'Wherever there is a project to conduct, we always say yes. We never say, "No, it is too dangerous".'

4.7 Potentially adverse long-term effects of outsourcing monitoring

Most aid agencies confirmed that relying on TPM to replace regular monitoring weakens institutional memory. No longer produced and maintained internally, fine-grained information collected in the field is likely to remain outside of the organisation and excluded from written communication from field monitors up the chain. When providers change and/or when they are managed by consultants, important context knowledge can get lost.

Generally, TPM seems to be most valuable for aid agencies as an (additional) measure of last resort, but its indiscriminate use can distance agencies from those they intend to assist and can thus undermine acceptance. As one organisation currently rolling out TPM in Afghanistan pointed out, there is a tendency to develop contracts that cover a large number of regions and implementation sites that are not accessible to the agency's own staff. Once these have been put in place, agencies may find it easier to keep relying on TPM even when monitoring becomes possible again for own staff in some of the areas covered. This is because going back to monitoring with their own staff would require adjusting terms of reference, travel and monitoring plans agreed with the TPM providers. In addition, internal capacities for monitoring cannot be maintained indefinitely, and when an agency has been relying on TPM for a long period of time, these capacities may no longer be available when access opens up. This dynamic can result in the crowding-out of an agency's own monitoring activities, as agencies with TPM experience confirmed in interviews.

5. Conclusion and lessons for successful TPM

By strengthening compliance in places where access is limited, TPM can meaningfully contribute to the broader monitoring and evaluation toolbox, with benefits for both donors and aid agencies.

For donors, TPM offers an option to verify monitoring information from partners. Ideally, this should complement rather than entirely substitute for monitoring conducted by an agency's own staff.

For aid agencies, TPM can provide a source of primary field data to inform programming and help verify partner reporting. However, as with donors, agencies should aim to do as much of their own monitoring as possible. TPM is most useful as a last resort measure or as a complement to internal monitoring and verification approaches by the recipient agencies. With this in mind, aid agencies should limit their primary reliance on monitoring by third parties to exceptional areas with constrained access. The practice of TPM is far from fully established, too: it needs to be regularly reassessed, and options for internalising monitoring should be regularly re-evaluated. To facilitate as much of their own monitoring as possible, Third-Party Monitoring should always be supported by acceptance-building measures and community feedback systems, as well as transparent communication with communities (beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries) overall.

The research identified the following lessons:

ANTICIPATE THE TIME AND RESOURCES NEEDED TO SET UP AND MAINTAIN EFFECTIVE TPM SYSTEMS.

Considerable investments need to be made in the selection, training and management of third-party monitors.

The work of field monitors is what defines TPM: their conduct is critical for the success of a monitoring mission and a community's perception of the monitoring exercise. Wherever possible, commissioning agencies should select field monitors jointly with TPM providers. Working together builds trust and ensures adequate consideration of quality vis-à-vis cost considerations. Similarly, joint training of technical staff from agencies and TPM teams should be conducted to build trust and ensure common understanding of monitoring or verification methods, as well as humanitarian principles and conflict-sensitive field research.

Once systems have been established and methods agreed upon, the management of monitoring partners should be done as close to the field as possible, and regular personal communication with all parties involved should be maintained. Personal exchange and oral debriefings are important as they can supplement the often-subpar quality of written reports and add valuable nuances. The relationship between the third-party monitor and implementing partners also requires investments and trust-building. In cases where the use of TPM is not explained and communicated in a transparent way throughout the cooperation,

implementing partners tend to see third-party monitors as ‘policing’ their work, making them less willing to share information. In Syria, TPM providers sometimes informed the partner they were monitoring only a few hours before their visit. This practice should be avoided unless unannounced visits have been clearly agreed upon with all parties.

KEEP EXPECTATIONS AND PLANS MODEST.

The overestimation of actual access and capacity to collect required data has led to frustration in many cases. Therefore, it is important to anticipate constraints early on and develop context-appropriate frameworks for data collection. Focusing on a few key indicators or geographic areas and ensuring data is valid can prove more effective than asking for too much, only to then find expectations remain unmet. Importantly, the complexity of data collection does not necessarily depend on the results level at which data is required (e.g., output, outcome, impact). Instead of verifying multiple inputs and outputs, organisations may find it more useful to limit their scope to a few key impact indicators.

MAKE SURE YOU CAN USE THE INFORMATION COLLECTED TO INFORM DECISIONS.

Whenever an agency uses TPM, large amounts of data are generated. Agencies reported that significant adjustments to information management systems were required to make sure externally gathered monitoring data could be absorbed, interpreted and retained by the agency. To accommodate this process, commissioning agencies need to invest in internal systems for using this data, and for feeding relevant information to those in charge of adapting and refining programme design.

FURTHER DEVELOP THE USE OF TECHNOLOGICAL DEVICES TO INCREASE CONTROL OVER FIELD MONITORING.

The few agencies relying on GPS to track teams in the field were satisfied with the way it improved their level of confidence in the data collected. Using GPS-stamped pictures of the field enumerators themselves on the site requires neither a highly sophisticated nor expensive system and has proven quite effective for the organisations using them. However, it is important to note that the use of technology to verify data also entails risks in many conflict contexts.²⁹ Generally, low-visibility gadgets should be used (e.g., simple smartphones instead of GPS and cameras). The use of technology should be openly discussed with field monitors, who often know most about the acceptance of specific tools in a given context, as well as potential bans on technologies by armed groups or authorities.

STRENGTHEN SECURITY PROTOCOLS AND DUTY OF CARE.

While TPM providers require flexibility to move around in the field without overly stringent security regulations, there is considerable room for improvement in the application of duty of care by contracting agencies. For example, some monitoring providers could gain access to the security information available to contracting agencies. Where this is not feasible and information cannot be shared, security advice based on confidential analysis should be shared prior to monitoring missions.

As a selection criterion, TPM providers should be expected to provide adequate insurance or an equivalent compensatory package for field monitors. Insurance costs should be included in TPM contracts and covered by commissioning agencies. Finally, TPM providers should be incentivised to develop a solid, internal security architecture. This can be achieved by including security standards in due diligence when choosing TPM providers, ideally after transparently communicating these requirements in calls.

COORDINATE USE OF TPM AND EXCHANGE ON EMERGING LESSONS.

Increasing demands for accountability and contracting access have in some cases produced multiple layers of monitoring, but without clear guidance on which monitoring functions

²⁹ For a more detailed assessment of the benefits and risks of different technologies, see Dette, R., Steets, J. and Sagmeister, E. (2016), ‘Technologies for Monitoring in Insecure Environments: A Menu of Options’ (report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: SAVEResearch.net).

could best be fulfilled at each level. Furthermore, consensus is lacking on the appropriate level of investment in monitoring, and how this adds up along the often long chains of sub-contracting in insecure settings. In response to multiple actors' commissioning TPM services, the need for coordination and joint approaches is growing – and combined efforts could bring clear benefits. In Afghanistan, for example, a contractor information management system (CIMS) has been put in place to document experiences, and pilots for collaborative monitoring programmes in selected areas are currently being discussed. Among others, the Afghan Monitoring Accreditation Scheme (AMAS) is currently under development and will offer training on monitoring to selected Afghan nationals.³⁰

While it is too early to assess the results of these processes, respondents seem to broadly agree that increased collaboration between commissioning agencies could help mitigate the risk of conflict of interest and improve the overall efficiency and effectiveness of TPM. Similar initiatives should be implemented in the Syrian context, as the use of TPM is growing. More intensive information-sharing between agencies would also help them avoid choosing providers that are over-committed, or have a poor performance record or possible conflict of interest.

REGULARLY REASSESS TPM AND ITS ALTERNATIVES.

Finally, the practice of TPM needs to be regularly reassessed and options for internalising monitoring regularly re-evaluated. Primary reliance on TPM should be limited to exceptional situations. Aid agencies should develop consensus on when, where, how and why TPM should be used, and when and how the agency should eventually resume responsibility for monitoring. Examples from NGOs and selected donor agencies show that alternatives to TPM do exist. One donor agency is using the same strategies as those used by its implementing partners to maintain its ability to monitor with own staff, stating that 'if they go in low profile, so does our staff, using local transportation and dressing accordingly'. Moreover, TPM should always be complemented with acceptance-building measures and community feedback systems, as well as overall transparent communication with communities (beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries).

³⁰ United Nations Risk Management Unit – Afghanistan, 'Technology, Monitoring and Evaluation. The Use of Technology by UN Agencies in Afghanistan in support of Monitoring and Evaluation' (in press).

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Annexes

Annex 1: Interview guidelines

Theme	Questions
Mapping	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why have you started working with TPMs? What is the purpose of TPM? 2. Please list the TPM providers you are working with or you have worked with over the past five years, indicating for which programme, in which area and for what purpose for each of them. 3. We would like to take precise examples of your agency's experience with TPM. Can you share: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) One example that you considered to be a (relatively) successful experience? b) One that you considered to be a (relatively) unsuccessful experience? c) What explains these different outcomes, in your opinion?
Relationship between agency and third-party monitor	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. How long have you been working with this partner? 5. What is its exact scope of responsibilities? 6. How many TPM staff are dedicated to your programme? 7. Who is in charge of managing that relationship within your agency?
Budget	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. What is the absolute cost of relying on TPM? 9. What share of the programme budget? 10. Can you estimate the number of man-days dedicated by your agency to the selection and training of TPM? 11. Can you estimate the number of man-days dedicated by your agency to the management of TPM, once selected? 12. Are TPM staff using some of the agency's resources to do their work: desk, transportation means, material (computers, phone, etc.)? 13. Have you noticed significant differences in costs depending on the nature of the TPM provider (NNGO, INGO, Afghan private company, etc.)? Do you have examples?
Contracting & assessment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 14. Is there a vetting system for TPM (details/examples)? 15. How do you assess the level of access that TPM providers have? 16. How do you assess their staff's technical capacities? 17. How do you assess their reporting capacities? 18. Is there a restitution clause in the contract with TPM in case of under-performance?
Training of third-party monitor	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 19. Who is in charge of training TPM providers and field monitors? 20. What type of training is offered (length, frequency, content)? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Are there components of the training that focus on humanitarian principles? b) How are monitors supposed to introduce themselves in the field? In insecure areas in particular?
Monitoring by third-party monitor	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 21. Who is in charge of developing logframes and monitoring frameworks? At what stage of the project cycle do TPMs typically come in?

	<p>22. What type of data are TPM providers supposed to collect for monitoring?</p> <p>a) Quantitative?</p> <p>b) Qualitative?</p> <p>c) Socioeconomic indicators?</p> <p>d) Feedback and complaints from beneficiaries?</p> <p>e) What level of results is data collected on (outputs, outcomes, impacts)?</p> <p>23. What tools are used for data collection?</p> <p>a) Standardised formats? Can you share these?</p> <p>b) Use of ICT (GPS, stamped pictures, etc.)?</p> <p>24. How often do monitors visit each site per project?</p> <p>25. Who is in charge of processing the data?</p> <p>26. How is the data used by your agency? Examples?</p> <p>27. Who is in charge of data analysis and reporting?</p>
Quality of monitoring	<p>28. How do you judge the quality of the monitoring process conducted by the TPM?</p> <p>29. How do you judge the quality of the data provided by the TPM?</p> <p>30. How would you rate the credibility of the data you get, on a scale from 1 to 10 (10 = completely trustworthy)?</p> <p>31. Does your agency have means for triangulating and checking the monitoring data provided by the TPM?</p> <p>a) How?</p> <p>b) How systematically is the data triangulated and verified?</p> <p>32. What other monitoring mechanisms do you rely on?</p>
Independence vs. access	<p>33. Have you identified conflicts of interest (e.g., TPM implementing and monitoring activities)?</p> <p>34. Do you think the access of the TPM staff to certain areas means a lesser degree of independence?</p> <p>a) Do you have examples (if possible, documented) of when this was a problem?</p> <p>b) Do you have examples of when TPMs were able to identify issues of aid diversion, gatekeepers and beneficiary selection in the field?</p> <p>35. Do you have documented examples of fraud, misleading information, etc., from one of your TPM providers?</p>
Risk transfer	<p>36. Have you considered that there could be a transfer of risks from your agency to the TPM?</p> <p>37. What mitigation measures are in place to limit that risk?</p> <p>38. Have there been any security incidents? Please provide examples.</p>
General assessment of TPM system	<p>39. What are the biggest benefits of TPM for your agency?</p> <p>40. What are the drawbacks of working with TPM?</p> <p>41. If you look at the total number of TPM monitoring experiences, how would you rate their usefulness (1–10)?</p> <p>42. Is reliance on TPM increasing or decreasing?</p> <p>43. For which types of programmes do you think TPM works best/worst?</p> <p>44. Which type of TPM providers do you find best suited to conduct robust monitoring (international companies, Afghan companies, Afghan NGOs, INGOs)?</p>
Further contacts	<p>45. Who else should I talk to in your agency?</p> <p>46. What other organisations should I talk to?</p> <p>47. Can you share the contact information of TPM providers you have worked with?</p>

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