Briefing Note
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SECURE ACCESS IN VOLATILE ENVIRONMENTS SAVE

The use of third-party monitoring in insecure contexts

LESSONS FROM AFGHANISTAN, SOMALIA AND SYRIA

This briefing note summarises the main findings and recommendations of SAVE research on Third-Party Monitoring (TPM), based on interviews with commissioning agencies, Third-Party Monitoring providers and donors as well as a review of literature.

WHAT IS THIRD-PARTY MONITORING?

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.

MAIN FINDINGS

This research concludes that TPM can provide a meaningful contribution to the broader monitoring and evaluation toolbox in places where access is limited. For donors, TPM offers an option to verify monitoring information from partners. Ideally, this is done in combination with at least partial monitoring 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, it should not replace an agency's regular monitoring. TPM is most useful when it is used as a measure of last resort or complements internal monitoring and verification approaches. Therefore, aid agencies should limit their primary reliance on monitoring by third parties to exceptional areas with constrained access. The practice of TPM needs to be regularly reassessed, and options for internalising monitoring regularly re-evaluated. Moreover, third-party monitoring should always be flanked by acceptance-building measures and community feedback systems, as well as overall transparent communication with communities (beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries).

MAIN BENEFITS AND SHORTCOMINGS OF THIRD-PARTY MONITORING

- Provides "eyes and ears" on the ground where own staff cannot go
- Allows the validation of monitoring data from implementing partners where confidence in partner reporting is lacking
- Can in some cases allow more cost-efficient field monitoring and thus more frequent missions
- Is most useful for verifying quantitative and physical outputs of aid projects
- Time and resources required to make TPM work are often underestimated
- Quality of reporting is frequently seen as subpar by TPM users
- Reputational risks from field monitors' actions need to be mitigated
- There is significant risk transfer to field monitors, especially where TPM providers lack adequate security systems
- TPM can negatively affect context understanding where aid agencies use it as a substitute for regular internal monitoring

Humanitarian Outcomes

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LESSONS ON USING TPM SUCCESSFULLY

Anticipate the need for time and resources to set up and maintain effective TPM systems.
The work of field monitors is what defines TPM: their conduct in the field is critical to the success of a monitoring mission and to outside perception during any monitoring exercise. Therefore, considerable investments need to be made in the selection, training and management of monitoring firms and individual monitors. In addition to the relationship between the third-party monitor and the commissioning agency, the relationship between the monitor and implementing partners requires continuous investments and trust building.

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 changes in access early on and to develop simple frameworks for data collection. Focusing on a few key indicators or geographic areas and ensuring the validity of data can prove to be more effective than asking for too much, only to then find that expectations remain unmet.

Make sure you can use the information collected to inform decisions.
Agencies consulted for this study reported that significant adjustments to information management systems were required to make sure that externally gathered monitoring data could be absorbed, interpreted and retained in the agency. Therefore, commissioning agencies need to invest in internal systems for using this data and feeding relevant information to those in charge of adapting and refining programme design.

Use technological devices to increase control over field monitoring.
Agencies relying on GPS to track teams in the field were satisfied with the degree of confidence they consequently felt in the data, particularly when it came to location- and time-stamped data. There are many affordable and easy-to-use tools available to humanitarians. However, it is important to note that the use of technology to collect and verify data also entails risks in conflict contexts.[1]

Strengthen security protocols and duty of care.
A transfer of risks to monitors is a tolerated consequence of third-party monitoring arrangements. Nevertheless, there is considerable room for improvement in the application of duty of care by contracting agencies. Commissioning agencies should share and discuss security advice with monitors ahead of monitoring missions. As a selection criterion, TPM providers should be expected to provide adequate insurance for their field monitors or access to an equivalent compensatory package for field monitors.

Coordinate use of TPM and exchange on emerging lessons.
With multiple actors commissioning TPM services, the need for coordination and joint approaches is growing. More information sharing between and amongst donor and aid agencies would help them to avoid choosing providers that have performed poorly in the past.

FULL REPORT

For more information and to cite this work, please refer to the full report: Sagmeister, E. and Steets, J., with Derzsi-Horvath, A. and Hennion, C. (2016) The Use of Third-Party Monitoring in Insecure Contexts: Lessons from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria (report from the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) research programme: **SAVEresearch.net**).

[1] For a more detailed assessment of the risks and benefits 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).