

Remote Monitoring Systems: A case of the SCI Somalia Program

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Humanitarian responses in conflict affected contexts are faced with difficult challenges in ensuring delivery of quality programs in volatile operating contexts such as those found in Somalia. While local staff often have access to project sites and are able to interact with beneficiaries to get feedback on the quality of the program, the benefit of getting perspectives that are external to the implementing team are very limited because of the complex insecure environment. As such monitoring of progress in delivering program commitments, the quality of the program and the effects of the program as requisite for timely decision making, learning and accountability call for multiple and innovative approaches to otherwise conventional monitoring systems.

Save the Children International (SCI) Somalia is a remotely managed country office comprising of the senior management team and technical advisers based in Nairobi and National Technical and operation staff based in the field offices in Somalia/Somaliland. We also implement our projects in partnership with local partners in line with Save the Children's theory change. Local partners have local acceptance and are able to reach more remote areas where services are most needed. While Somaliland and the northern and central parts of Puntland are accessible to all staff, international staff (Non Somali nationals) are not able to access project sites in most of Central South Somalia and parts of Southern Puntland which form the heart of the humanitarian response. This limits the effectiveness of monitoring systems these areas. We have over time had to learn and continually adapt our monitoring systems to ensure quality programming even in areas with limited access. This is what forms the **remote monitoring system**. The following are key strategies that we have adopted to make the remote monitoring system functional and useful.

Setting up and ensuring functionality of beneficiary Accountability mechanisms: Accountability to beneficiaries is a key element of the SCI MEAL¹ system, According to HAP² (2010), accountability is the means through which power is used responsibly. The remote monitoring system ensures that the power entrusted to Save the Children is used responsibly to bring change in the lives of children. In SCI Somalia program beneficiaries' input to desired interventions is collected through needs assessments. Prior to the commencement of project implementation, detailed information about the project is shared with beneficiaries using different channels including, sensitization meetings, banners, and brochures and through community leaders. Beneficiaries are invited to participate in key implementation phases such as development of targeting criteria and actual beneficiary selection. Complaints and Response Mechanisms (CRM) are set up and information about these mechanisms is shared widely with the community including children. Managed by the Monitoring and Evaluations team, the CRM provides an important platform through which monitoring happens at field level and remotely at the country office. Our CRM include hotlines, beneficiary complaints desks, suggestion boxes, one on one meetings with MEAL during field visits, and proactive calls to beneficiaries. Through CRM, feedback and complaints on program quality and implementation modalities are received or solicited from beneficiaries, addressed by relevant teams and solutions fed back to the beneficiaries often through phone calls and community meetings. This facilitates the remote monitoring system.

¹ MEAL (Monitoring Evaluation Accountability and Learning)

² The 2010 HAP Standard in Accountability and Quality Management

Engaging independent field monitors: Independent field monitors are Somali nationals external to SCI who are deployed to monitor our programs in areas that are not accessible by any teams other than the field implementing teams. The monitors have technical expertise and understanding of the given programs that enables them to assess the quality of services being delivered and collect feedback from project beneficiaries on issues such as knowledge of their entitlements, awareness of complaints and response mechanisms, the outcomes of our interventions and their overall satisfaction with the services and the way they were/are delivered. Independent field monitors use discreet data collection methods to collect data from project beneficiaries, children, youth groups, community leaders and wider community members. The independent monitors meet SCI staff only when planning their visit. They manage their own program and movement making them independent of the SCI operation in choosing project sites or beneficiaries to be interviewed. This allows objectivity in the field monitoring exercises and has generated information that has been used to improve the quality of the program.

Use of GPS enabled cameras and Mobile phones for data collection: The era of technology has opened opportunities for easy collection of data with increased credibility. This is of key importance in remote monitoring where supervision of data collection and verification is difficult. Using GPS enabled cameras, pictures of project beneficiaries and sites are taken with GPS coordinates that show their location enhancing credibility. Mobile phones enable easy collection of routine quantitative data with minimized chances of errors and reduced effort in data entry and initial analysis. Mobile applications also provide for taking GPS coordinates at the point of data collection and pictures. We are using mobile phones for monitoring program quality especially in the nutrition programs. Mobile phones are also used in surveys such as Food Security and Livelihoods post distribution surveys, Knowledge Attitudes and Practices (KAP) surveys, SMART³ surveys which are all part of the monitoring system.

Conducting field visits: While not as frequent, as security allows, technical and more senior international staff are able to make short field visits. During these visits they conduct meetings with field teams to discuss progress in implementation, bottlenecks and lessons learnt. They also have the opportunity to meet the beneficiaries from whom they gather feedback on quality of services or goods that they have received from Save the Children. These visits allow quick problem solving, verification of information provided by the field teams, first hand and on-site capacity building.

Conducting Simulated field visits: With very limited opportunities for actual field visits simulated field visits have been explored. In simulated field visits, the technical team block away a week to review raw data repatriated from sites to analyze adherence to program standards, have telephone conversations with sampled beneficiaries and offer on job coaching for field staff. This strategy has been specifically adapted by the nutrition team where a typical simulated visit will include review of sample of OTP/SFP cards of children and Pregnant and Lactating Women (PLW) that have exited the program, photographs, supply documents and checklists, review of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) notes and phone/Skype with the field Program Manager, facility staff volunteers and sampled beneficiaries. The scale up and increased frequency of using this approach is bound to enhance the quality of the program and provide sound basis for capacity building.

Challenges

Implementing remote monitoring systems is a shift from using conventional monitoring systems in areas that present limitations to access. This in itself removes the first level of contact with field staff and beneficiaries that would allow faster decision making on required changes.

³ SMART (Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions)

Repatriation of documents for simulated field visits is often faced with delays and incomplete raw data but this has improved with time as the simulated field visits became part and parcel of the team's routine

Finding reliable independent monitors who have the relevant program background knowledge and experience; maintain full independence to collect analysis and provide discrete and objective information is often a challenge as most of these monitors are Somali's who can be compromised by their clan affiliations. Information obtained from the independent monitors is SCI triangulated with the information collected through other monitoring mechanisms.

The ability to take GPS coordinates and pictures using mobile phones is seen as security threat by parties to conflict. This has led to banning their use in areas that are still controlled by parties to conflict.

Field staff that implement the program and collect monitoring data need capacity building which attempted remotely is insufficient. Additionally, conducting trainings in Central and South Somalia is very difficult which has led to options of conducting the trainings in more accessible areas like Hargeisa or Nairobi. Besides being costly, this does not allow on site coaching and mentoring that would be possible if the training was conducted in actual project areas or closer to the implementation sites.

Elsewhere in accessible program areas, we run a robust MEAL system that involves participation of all stakeholders including children. The MEAL team often with the support of technical advisors leads project staff and partners to develop a detailed M&E plan and a plan for accountability to beneficiaries. During implementation, routine monitoring is undertaken jointly by SCI staff and partners including government departments where applicable. Technical Advisors and MEAL conduct periodic field visits to monitor the quality of the program and collect direct feedback from beneficiaries. Children participate in providing data during routine monitoring but the country program has explored working with children in child led processes where the children lead their own data collection and analysis.

While conventional and the remote monitoring system are applied in different program areas, the use of their outcomes to inform decision making, learning and improvement is irrespective of system used. On a quarterly basis, program review meetings are held in field⁴ locations where technical advisors and the implementing teams reflect and plan using outcomes of the two systems.

Conclusion

Despite the challenging security contexts we strive to deliver quality programs through development of relevant approaches aimed at ensuring monitoring, learning and accountability. While some may have reservations on the effectiveness of remote monitoring systems research⁵ has shown that with adequate attention paid to improving remote monitoring and accountability practices, there is the potential of success. This is the path that we have chosen.

⁴ Including Mogadishu for CSS

⁵ Monitoring and Monitoring and accountability practices for remotely managed projects implemented in volatile operating environments Tear fund 2012 , http://www.humanitarianinnovation.org/sites/default/files/remote_monitoring_and_accountability_practice__web_2.pdf