

Monitoring in the Context of COVID-19

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Introduction

In the span of a few months, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many facets of political, economic, and social life around the globe, posing challenges for every region, country, and community. Among its many impacts, the virus has threatened the delivery of humanitarian and development assistance; the most vulnerable populations will be hit hard. Internally displaced persons, refugees, or members of a marginalized community cannot “self-isolate,” as survival depends on their daily wages or the provision of regular assistance. Continuation of aid to the most vulnerable populations is critical during these times.

International donors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and philanthropic organizations are marshalling efforts to provide assistance. Monitoring the delivery of this assistance is critical to ensure it is provided

effectively and in an ethical manner based upon “do no harm” principles. As implementers adapt their interventions to address the new needs and challenges posed by COVID-19, monitors will also have to adapt their approaches and methods.

The best approaches will be context specific. However, certain modifications to research and monitoring activities can reduce risk for all involved. Below are examples of adapted practices that can help protect monitors, communities, and beneficiaries. These practices are currently being implemented by Management Systems International (MSI), a Tetra Tech Company, on our third-party monitoring (TPM) projects. These projects continue to adapt and update practices as they monitor the specific situations in each of these countries.

This paper was prepared by MSI staff to contribute to the discussion and understanding of the important development challenges facing policymakers and practitioners

Adapting How We Monitor

Emphasizing the Rights and Safety of Field Staff

Field staff face risks in this environment, since TPM necessitates considerable contact, or opportunities for contact, with the general populace. In some cases, it requires visiting such areas as humanitarian distribution points, where people very often congregate. We believe it is a professional and moral obligation to discuss these risks with field monitors at the outset and take whatever steps are available to increase their safety. We recommend that TPM activities:

- Provide monitors with the most recent World Health Organization (WHO) guidance and ensure they are fully aware of the risks, mitigation measures, and their rights to refuse to participate.
- Provide all monitors with basic protective equipment, including gloves and masks, to be used when physically evaluating interventions conducted in hospitals and mobile health clinics.
- Train monitors in, at least, the minimum mitigation practices related to COVID-19, including washing hands thoroughly and frequently for 20 seconds and practicing physical distancing during field research.
- Ensure at the start of any monitoring activity that neither monitors nor any of their household members have displayed COVID-19 symptoms. If a household member is symptomatic, that monitor should not be assigned to the monitoring activity.

Sampling Adaptations

The benefits of specific monitoring activities should be balanced against the risks of COVID-19 transmission. This means taking precautionary measures to mitigate transmission to the most vulnerable individuals by reducing contact. We recommend that TPM activities:

- Avoid collecting household data in person. If household data collection is essential, it should be conducted only through remote methodologies such as phone or online interviews. Conducting in-person surveys with specific household members at locations other than the household may also be possible if COVID-19 mitigation practices are employed.
- Avoid interviewing persons in high-risk COVID-19 groups, such as the elderly and persons suffering from autoimmune diseases or underlying health conditions.
- Focus monitoring efforts on key informants or immediate beneficiaries who may be easier to reach remotely rather than in-person. For example, these would include shop owners (for voucher modalities), bakery owners (for food assistance modalities), and contractors (for infrastructure and civil works interventions).

Monitoring Instrument Adaptations

Adapting monitoring instruments and relying on other forms of monitoring can minimize unnecessary contact between monitors and respondents. We recommend that TPM activities:

- Modify introductions to interview instruments to highlight COVID-19 risks and measures that have been introduced to minimize those risks (e.g., interviewing from a distance, phone or online interviews, etc.).
 - Shorten monitoring instruments by including questions designed to collect only essential information during beneficiary interviews; this would reduce the time required for interviews.
 - Identify opportunities to observe delivery of assistance to minimize the number of interviews.
 - Include questions and observations that assess whether and how partners are applying WHO and other appropriate COVID-19 guidance when implementing distributions or delivering other assistance.
- Consider replacing focus group discussions and group interviews with alternative forms of research that limit the physical distance between respondents.
 - Identify, in advance, safe locations for data collection at the periphery of any congested areas such as distribution points.
 - Require monitors to conduct interviews from the maximum allowable distance (six feet or more) — far enough to avoid direct contact, but close enough to allow the monitor to ask questions and listen to responses. Monitors should inform respondents of the purpose of this social distancing as part of the introduction to the interview.

Field Research Adaptations

When conducting in-person research, monitors should be directed to take common sense steps to reduce transmission risk. We recommend that TPM activities:

- Conduct remote data collection rather than in-person interviews, where possible. This may require beneficiaries to share their phone number or call a certain number if they want to provide feedback or participate in data collection.

Adapting What We Monitor

Types of Humanitarian Assistance

Restructuring how we monitor a modality to reduce inter-person contact, while monitoring the full breadth of humanitarian assistance during the pandemic is advised. We recommend that TPM activities:

- Focus on real-time rather than post-distribution monitoring. This may require more observations at distribution points but will reduce the need to meet beneficiaries in their homes.
- Conduct more frequent verification activities in lieu of beneficiary-focused monitoring activities. A valuable perspective on the delivery of humanitarian assistance can be obtained by verifying the technical aspects of delivery, such as the results of water quality tests and inspections of infrastructure, and the contents of food and non-food kits at warehouses.
- Conduct monitoring visits at health facilities outside of regular working hours to minimize personal contact with beneficiaries and allow health care professionals to attend to their core tasks with few distractions. Observations could be limited and focused primarily on documentation. In areas heavily hit by COVID-19, it may be advisable to forego monitoring at health facilities altogether.

Compliance with World Health Organization Good Practice

While assisting affected communities to deal with the crisis, humanitarian partners should adapt their own approaches to protect their

staff. Third-party monitoring can help partners identify the extent to which their systems are complying with good practice to prevent disease transmission. We recommend that TPM activities:

- Monitor the extent to which humanitarian partners are adopting measures to reduce crowding at humanitarian sites. Monitors should specifically observe whether the following measures have been adopted, where applicable:
 - Have beneficiaries been notified in advance and given specific times to receive assistance (e.g., through WhatsApp) to reduce potential crowding at the site?
 - Are distribution sights clearly signed to facilitate the efficient movement of persons - with separate reception, verification, and distribution areas and separate entry and exit points?
 - Are distributions conducted in areas that are sufficiently large to accommodate the expected number of beneficiaries with appropriate space between individuals?
- Monitor the extent to which humanitarian partners are adopting measures to promote good hygiene and COVID-19 sensitization. Monitors should specifically observe whether the following measures have been adopted, where applicable:
 - Are materials displayed at the site providing information about COVID-19 transmission risks and mitigation measures?

- Has the partner provided handwashing facilities at the site with disposable towels?
- Has the site, specifically reception and registration areas, been properly cleaned and sanitized at the beginning of the day? How often is it cleaned throughout the day?
- Are staff or beneficiaries who appear ill or have persistent coughs instructed to

leave the site and are they referred to the nearest primary healthcare center?

The approaches outlined in this brief are intended to help monitoring programs and humanitarian partners adapt to the impacts of COVID-19. They should be re-assessed regularly in consultation with our donors and humanitarian partners, as our understanding of COVID-19 increases.