WHAT IS THE POINT…
IF NOTHING CHANGES?

Current Practices and Future Opportunities to Improve
Remote Monitoring and Evaluation in Syria

Building Markets

Orange
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Research

Canada

The most important aspect of any remote Monitoring and Evaluation is an explicit plan for how to act on the results. As one interviewee put it, "What is the point… if nothing changes?"

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list of acronyms

AAAS	American Association for the Advancement of Science
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EU	European Union
FCS	Food Consumption Score
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Crescent
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IS	Islamic State
IVR	Interactive Voice Response
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IRC	International Rescue Committee
LAC	Local Administrative Council
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
mVAM	Mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping Unit
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSAG	Non-State Armed Group
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODK	Open Data Kit
QA	Quality Assurance
RDD	Random Digit Dialing
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SCR	Security Council Resolution
SMS	Short Message Service
SSF	Somalia Stability Fund
TPM	Third-Party Monitor
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNOSAT	United Nations Operational Satellite Applications Programme
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme

PREFACE

This report was written and produced by Building Markets and Orange Door Research. Building Markets wishes to thank Global Affairs Canada for making this report possible through its generous support.

The principle objective of this report was to analyze current remote Monitoring and Evaluation practices of humanitarian actors operating across the Turkey-Syria border. The report is based on 57 interviews with bilateral and multilateral donors, international/nongovernmental organizations, contractors, and civil society organizations involved in the crisis response. Most of these interviews were conducted with organizations based in Turkey. Given that challenges faced by Turkish organizations differ from those in Damascus, Amman, and elsewhere, the findings of this report may not apply to aid operations in other locations. However, lessons and examples from other countries have also been drawn upon.

Monitoring and evaluation uses data to measure and assess the performance of a program with the goal of improving its outcomes. Remote monitoring and evaluation refers to situations in which this data is collected or submitted without the physical presence of staff, contractors, or donors from the organization implementing the program. In Syria, where international organizations are largely unable to directly deliver humanitarian aid, remote monitoring and evaluation is heavily relied upon.

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Building Markets, headquartered in New York City, United States, is a non-profit organization that creates jobs and encourages economic growth in crisis-affected countries by connecting local micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and civil society organizations to new opportunities. Through its approach, the organization has profiled and built a network of more than 24,175 local businesses and organizations, assisted them in winning $1.3 billion in contracts, and helped create over 69,791 jobs.

Orange Door Research works with development agencies, foundations and hedge funds seeking new ways to improve their decision-making in developing countries and emerging markets. Orange Door collects proprietary, real-time survey data to track the views, behaviors and plans of people on the ground.

Building Markets welcomes any case studies or best practices that would strengthen this report. These can be submitted, along with any questions and comments, to reports@buildingmarkets.org.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Acute security challenges have largely prevented international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) from operating inside Syria. Instead, they have relied heavily on Syrian organizations, who are delivering an estimated 75% of aid. This has required remote monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of projects, a technique that uses data to measure and assess the performance of a program with the goal of improving its outcomes. In the case of remote M&E, it helps ensure aid reaches its intended beneficiaries and achieves humanitarian objectives.

Remote M&E confronts the dual challenge of insecurity and delegation. Insecurity often restricts the types and quantities of data that can be collected, while delegating to local organizations and staff can reduce data quality. Remote M&E also raises ethical issues. Donors and INGOs assume that local staff can more safely access and collect data in the assigned locations, but the increasing mortality rate among local humanitarian workers shows that this assumption does not always hold. Ultimately, the risk threshold for remote M&E has to be lower than the threshold for delivering potentially life-saving aid.

Barriers and insecurity inside Syria make an effective M&E process extremely difficult; coordination among INGO and NGOs is critical. The politicization of aid and risks posed by the operating environment, however, have created a lack of transparency between humanitarian organizations, which has severely curtailed the exchange of information and lessons learned. Fieldwork conducted for this research provides an example of this lack of transparency. Every interviewee was asked to share a sample of a monitoring report, or even a blank template used for monitoring purposes. Not a single interviewee consented to provide such information due to security concerns.

However, while this research found that there is significant scope to improve remote M&E practices in Syria, it also identified many innovative approaches, such as mobile phone surveys and technology, QR codes, and satellite imagery, which can be expanded. This report captures some of those innovations, lessons learned, and the challenges experienced by both international and local actors in Syria.

Finding 1: Local NGOs implement most of the aid in Syria but do not have sufficient support for organizational development.

Recommendation 1: Donors should increase their direct funding and support to local NGOs and civil society organizations (CSO) to improve local M&E capacity. This would not only increase the efficiency of aid dollars, but investments would spur the development of new, innovative M&E methods that are best suited to the local context.

Finding 2: Technology-enabled M&E methods such as mobile phone surveys and satellite data analysis are not being used to their full potential to supplement M&E activities.

Recommendation 2: Donors, INGOs, and contractors should fund proof-of-concept projects to determine the best way to implement and scale technological innovations.

Finding 3: Information on aid activities and lessons learned are not being shared among I/NGOs and donors due to political and security concerns, exacerbating the challenges of coordination and effective aid delivery.

Recommendation 3: The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs should establish a Syria-focused data portal consolidating donor, INGO, and contractor M&E reports, making anonymized, top-level data available to track project implementation by district and sector. This portal could be an expansion of existing systems, such as Humanitarian Response and HDX, or a separate system that incorporates additional safeguards for participating organizations.

Finding 4: Tensions exist between Third Party Monitors (TPMs) and implementing partners due to a perceived lack of commitment to humanitarian principles and transparency on the part of TPMs.

Recommendation 4: TPMs should increase their efforts to demonstrate to donors and I/NGOs that they are committed to humanitarian principles; TPMs should also create standard procedures for communicating and sharing results with the local organizations being monitored, and reduce duplication of M&E efforts.

Finding 5: Implementing organizations often rely on local administrative councils (LACs) for access to and identification of beneficiaries. Donors apply ad hoc restrictions on engaging with LACs.

Recommendation 5: Donors, I/NGOs, and contractors should develop a deeper understanding and engagement with local administrative councils. These efforts will improve the international community's ability to leverage local capacity and expertise, while maintaining safeguards against corruption and diversion of resources.

1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

1.1 INTRODUCTION

For political and security reasons, international organizations have relied on remote management, to various extents and at various times, in Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and South Sudan. In Syria, however, the constantly shifting front lines and incessant threat of violence have required international organizations to implement remote management from the start, and likely for the duration of the conflict (Howe et al 2015).

Several aspects of the Syrian conflict distinguish it from other protracted emergencies:

- Few Syrian CSOs existed prior to the crisis. The Assad regime repressed most community initiatives, and while some organizations were active, human rights groups were often targeted.

- The lack of local civil society is compounded by the limited number of international organizations that had a presence in Syria before the start of hostilities. This meant that when the crisis began to unfold, international organizations did not have pre-existing relationships with local actors or any infrastructure for rapidly absorbing large amounts of resources.

- Syrians possess a greater capacity for a local response than most conflict-affected populations due to the educational and economic opportunities available to them before the start of the conflict, as well as the extensive Syrian diaspora community. There is potential for a strong, well-educated sector of organizations that can fill gaps in services and respond to the needs of Syrians on the ground, as well as those displaced across the region.

- Syrians have a stronger connection to the outside world when compared to most conflict-affected populations. More than 81% of Syrians own a mobile phone and two-thirds of the population had access to an internet-capable mobile device (UKAID 2017: 6).

- The Assad government remains a powerful actor that continues to place significant restrictions on the humanitarian response. With nearly half of Syrian territory held by government forces, humanitarian actors are dealing with an additional barrier to access targeted beneficiaries.

- These acute security challenges and the politicization of aid are compounded by problems of coordination and information sharing in the humanitarian community. M&E reports are not often shared between organizations, preventing lessons learned and the adoption of best practices.

This report analyzes the current remote M&E practices of humanitarian actors operating across the Turkey-Syria border. Drawing on lessons from other countries and sensitive to the unique context of the Syria crisis, it also highlights opportunities for improving the efficacy of M&E and provides recommendations to the international community.

1.2 CONFLICT AND HUMANITARIAN AID IN SYRIA

The Syrian crisis began to unfold in 2011 when demonstrators emboldened by the Arab Spring took to the streets of the southern town of Deraa and demanded the release of political prisoners.[1] Opposition groups coalesced into the Free Syrian Army, which was recognized as legitimate by the United States, Great Britain, and other foreign powers, and began receiving military assistance. Bashar al-Assad's government appeared critically weakened, losing territory to non-state armed groups and suffering from high-level defections.

However, government forces were bolstered by the rise of radical Islamist groups in 2013. The US and Great Britain suspended their military assistance to the armed opposition for fear that aid would be diverted to groups such as the Islamic State (IS). By 2014, major territorial gains were made by both government forces and IS.

Turkey has been the primary base for delivering aid into Syria. The Turkish border is relatively close to hard-hit areas such as Aleppo and the country's infrastructure facilitates the logistics required for aid delivery. Cross-border aid has not passed from Iraq due to disputes between groups on either side of the border and the presence of IS. A small cross-border operation exists in Lebanon, and Jordan is becoming an increasingly important hub due to political developments in Turkey and the increasing needs in Homs and other parts of western Syria.

Figure 1. Territorial control in Syria as of April 2018
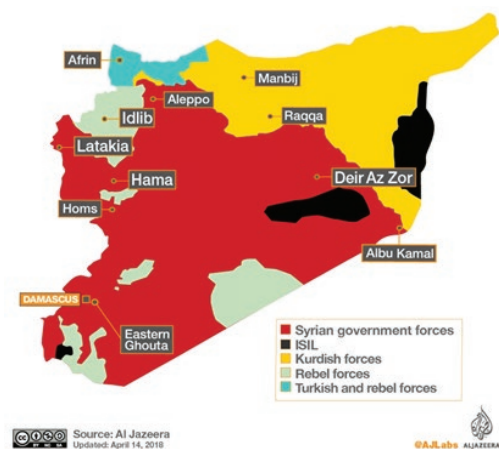
Syria remains divided among a myriad of armed groups, where territorial control is fluid and the humanitarian situation is dire. Over half of the country's population has fled their homes, 4.8 million people are estimated to have sought refuge in the region and beyond, and an estimated 6.3 million people are internally displaced.[2] The magnitude of the crisis led the United Nations to launch its largest appeal in history, requesting tens of billions of dollars for humanitarian aid to the country and the region.[3] Alongside this resource commitment, INGOs have been urgently trying to expand their reach to support the 13.5 million people inside Syria who are in need of assistance.

UNSC Resolution 2165

Alarmed by the scale of the crisis and the inability of humanitarian actors to operate within Syria, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 2165 (SCR 2165) in 2014 to explicitly authorize the delivery of humanitarian aid from the neighboring states of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. The resolution also requires monitoring at border crossings to ensure that only humanitarian aid is delivered into Syria. It requires renewal every 180 days.

SCR 2165 created a dual system, with some humanitarian agencies based in Damascus attempting to work through the consent of the Assad government and under the leadership of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), and humanitarian aid to areas controlled by Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs)[4] delivered through a cross-border program. This formal monitoring mechanism ensures that humanitarian aid can cross into Syria but does not provide humanitarian actors access within Syria. INGOs must rely on local organizations to distribute aid, implement projects, and conduct M&E.

A UN representative described how this monitoring mechanism operates along the Turkey-Syria[5] Border. The UN has established hubs at each border crossing, and at around 4 AM, trucks line up on either side. Goods from the Turkish trucks are unloaded and transferred through the UN hubs, where officials inspect the

cargo to ensure that all contents serve a humanitarian purpose and match the list of items on the waybill. The goods are x-rayed to ensure that contraband is not smuggled inside, and even the level of fuel in the trucks is measured to prevent fuel smuggling. The items are then transferred to the Syrian side of the border, where the process is repeated. Once the process is completed, the drivers receive documents which must be shown at checkpoints inside Syria. The UN delivers regular reports to the governments of both Syria and Turkey on the flow of goods through these crossing points.

The broader humanitarian response has maintained an information "firewall" between the Damascus-based and cross-border operations out of concern that information on cross-border activities, if possessed by the Assad government, could increase risks for staff or restrictions on activities (ENN 2014: 138). This firewall means that Damascus-based aid organizations often do not have information on cross-border activities, and vice versa, preventing any form of effective coordination.

This strict monitoring mechanism, however, does not allay concerns from some actors that humanitarian aid could be diverted to armed groups. For instance, fuel or food meant for civilians could be used by armed forces.[6]   In this environment, international aid agencies face intense pressure to monitor the distribution of aid. If INGOs are unable to convince the Security Council that aid is provided only to civilians, SCR 2165 may fail to be renewed, further jeopardizing humanitarian access.

Syrian NGOs and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Before the war, Syria did not have an established NGO sector. As one UN official put it: "NGOs as we know them did not exist in Syria. In less than seven years, a robust civil society has emerged. There are Arab NGOs, Gulf NGOs, Turkish NGOs, and Syrian NGOs."[7] It is estimated that 700 Syrian civil society organizations have formed since the start of the conflict.[8]

These organizations[9] encompass a diverse range of local and diaspora actors. Some CSOs grew out of pre-existing professional organizations. Before the start of

the war, for example, the Syrian British Medical Society focused on fostering academic links among British-Syrian healthcare professionals. The organization now focuses on providing medical training and emergency care (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015: 9). Some Syrian CSOs have recruited hundreds of professional staff, while others are composed of a handful of local volunteers. In some cases, CSOs in Syria are run by armed groups that provide services to civilians (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015: 9-10).

These newly-formed CSOs operate outside of the traditional humanitarian sector. Many have limited experience providing humanitarian assistance, do not follow standard accounting and management practices, and lack any pre-existing relationships with established aid providers (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015). These characteristics can create misunderstandings and make it difficult for CSOs to communicate effectively with INGOs and donors. International organizations are more likely to treat local organizations as mere service providers than genuine partners despite CSOs' greater knowledge of the local context (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015). In many cases, INGO program managers work with CSO staff whom they have never met in person. Six interviewees emphasized the challenges of recruiting, managing, and training staff when the only way to communicate with them is via Skype or WhatsApp.[10] This remote relationship makes establishing trust difficult, especially in such a high-stakes environment.

Understanding local relationships is a challenge for donors and INGOs. CSO staff, for example, often have personal ties to local authorities and/or armed groups (SAVE 2015: 3). Indeed, these relationships are precisely what allow Syrian CSOs access to otherwise impermissible areas. In some cases, CSOs partner with local administrative councils (LACs) to deliver aid.[11] Many LACs formed in non-state armed groups (NSAG)-controlled areas in 2012 and 2013, following the withdrawal of government forces, and therefore government services (Hajjar et al 2017: 3). The primary focus of LACs has been coordinating local relief activities, although some have evolved to fill other roles of local government (Hajjar et al 2017). LACs can help tailor projects to meet local needs, identify beneficiaries, and secure access for implementing

partners (SAVE 2015: 3), but these councils also have the potential to become a source of corruption. Some donors are concerned that aid may be redirected to these local councils or misallocated as a result of council interference.[12]

Turkey and Cross-Border Aid

Alongside this, aid agencies face an increasingly difficult working environment in Turkey. Hundreds of local NGOs were shut down in Turkey following the July 2016 coup attempt amidst government claims that they actively opposed the government. In March 2017, Turkish authorities revoked one large INGOs' registration, forcing the organization to shut down its Turkish operations.[13] The following month, another American INGO was also forced to suspend operations in Turkey. In July 2017, Turkish police entered a Starbucks in Gaziantep frequented by expats, checking IDs and laptops of foreign NGO workers.[14]

More generally, the Turkish government has increased the bureaucratic hurdles required for NGOs to operate in the country. INGOs are having difficulty procuring visas and work permits for international staff. Project managers must often supervise teams in Turkey from offices in Amman or elsewhere, resulting in a "remote-remote"[15] operation. As a result, many prominent INGOs have made plans to relocate their Syria-focused operations elsewhere.[16]

2. CURRENT REMOTE M&E PRACTICES IN SYRIA

M&E seeks to measure and assess program performance with the goal of improving outcomes. In practice, monitoring tends to focus on the delivery of outputs, while evaluations tend to focus on measuring outcomes. Outputs are the tangible items distributed and activities conducted by an aid organization, such as bags of rice, tarpaulins, and other basic supplies. Outputs may also include activities such as training sessions. Outcomes, by contrast, are the changes caused by the delivery of outputs, such as a reduction in malnutrition or an improvement in literacy rates (e.g. Mills-Scofield 2012).

Donor concern about aid being diverted from intended beneficiaries results in substantial resources spent monitoring outputs. Every donor interviewed for this report required some method of monitoring from their implementing partners, and every local CSO reported using indicators to monitor their projects. The risk of aid diversion has created a culture in which M&E is primarily a verification exercise. According to interviews, few evaluations are conducted in Syria due to the difficulty of training local staff in evaluation procedures and the potential risks of conducting the evaluation (surveys and interviews, for example). Several interviewees commented on the missed opportunities for learning and recommended an increased emphasis on evaluation.[17]

Some donors spoke of "real-time evaluations" that assess whether projects are progressing as planned.[18] These activities, however, do not satisfy the UN's definition of "evaluation", which systematically assesses progress towards an outcome (UNDP 2002).

"Real-time evaluations" are simply output monitoring by another name. None of our interviewees could provide a concrete example of an evaluation that their organization conducted in Syria. Indeed, one donor's response seems to summarize the current humanitarian response: "We haven't really thought about [evaluations] that much in the Syrian context."[19] The logistical and security challenges of conducting an evaluation using traditional on-the-ground methods outweigh the benefits for most donors.

Output Tracking

Among the interviewees, output tracking activities primarily involved accounting for the distribution of tangible items such as food, shelter materials, and livelihood tools. Donors, INGOs, and CSOs agreed during interviews that outputs were being adequately monitored despite challenges in the field. Output tracking is most challenging in IS-controlled areas where field staff are not allowed to use electronic devices and rely instead on pen and paper, if their monitoring activities are approved by IS.[20] Paper documents are later carried to headquarters or scanned and transmitted via Skype or email.[21] In some cases, field staff monitor projects covertly and try to remember the relevant statistics without risking a paper trail.[22]

Government- and Kurdish-controlled areas also pose challenges for output tracking. As in IS territory, field staff must rely on pen and paper to record information.[23] Local authorities must approve every survey question and monitoring activity, and government authorities

are more likely than Kurdish authorities to refuse permission. Government-held areas are considered more difficult and risky for field staff, resulting in many of the staff there operating covertly.[24]

Areas controlled by Non-State Armed Groups (NSAG) have, in comparison, provided a greater opportunity for output tracking, as authorities rarely require any registration or approval of monitoring activities and electronic devices can be used most of the time.[25] All of the CSOs interviewed that operate in NSAG-controlled areas reported using tablets or smartphones to record data. In most cases, outputs are tracked using the Kobo toolbox, a software package built on top of Open Data Kit (ODK). Indeed, 19 out of 30 CSOs (63%) interviewed for this study specifically mentioned the use of Kobo for their data collection. Other CSOs relied on communication apps such as Whatsapp to record information that could eventually be compiled into a spreadsheet,[26] with larger CSOs using proprietary software to track their outputs.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) deploys perhaps the most sophisticated output tracking system in NSAG-controlled areas (IRC 2016), maintaining a comprehensive overview of its activities by triangulating multiple sources of data, some of which are collected in real-time. Like most INGOs, program implementation teams monitor their own activities and file regular reports, but this is supplemented by specialized "research and monitoring assistants" who operate independently from the program teams. Where possible, these research assistants use smartphones and ODK software to track key performance metrics. Depending on donor requirements, third party monitors may also visit program sites as a third check on project activities. In addition, IRC created a commodity tracking system that uses QR codes printed on all commodities traveling into Syria. IRC and partner staff scan the codes using GPS-enabled smartphones outside Syria to track the movement of goods to the distribution endpoints.

Beyond the restrictions imposed by armed groups, CSOs face two additional challenges for output monitoring in Syria. First, different donors require CSOs to monitor different metrics, use different formats, and report at different frequencies. Over two-thirds of interviewed CSOs are currently implementing projects funded by more than one donor. Based on our interviews, it is common for a single CSO to be managing funds from eight or more donors simultaneously.[27]

Each of these donors requires regular monitoring reports on a weekly, monthly, and/or quarterly basis. As one interviewee put it, "Donors are all over the place... it gets tiring. They all want different things."[28]

Donors are all over the place... it gets tiring. They all want different things.
- CSO Interviewee

Satisfying these requirements strains the already limited resources of these CSOs and can create tensions with donors if submitted reports do not meet international standards.[29] As an interviewee explained, "Local partners have a new language to learn every time they get a new donor."[30] The result is that larger CSOs who have the capacity and staff to manage donor requirements have an advantage at securing funds even when they have less local access or experience. The high frequency of donor reporting also hinders the ability of CSOs to digest and learn from the findings of the monitoring exercises.[31]

Local partners have a new language to learn every time they get a new donor.
- CSO Interviewee

The second major challenge is the lack of transparency in M&E activities. To a large extent, this results from legitimate security concerns. Donors and INGOs fear that if government forces or other actors have information on their activities, their staff's safety and access will be jeopardized. This lack of transparency prevents learning and improvement. As one official remarked, "I'd like to know what various NGOs are doing in terms of [M&E]...[information on M&E activities] hasn't been pulled together."[32] A lack of transparency also hinders coordination, resulting

in survey fatigue among the local populations, as each CSO and third party monitor conducts its own interviews with beneficiaries, often asking the same questions. An aid worker estimated, with only slight exaggeration, "everyone in Idleb has been interviewed at least once."[33]

Third-Party Monitors (TPM)

The use of third-party monitors (TPM) has rapidly expanded in Syria. The industry did not exist in Syria at the start of the conflict, but at least 11 TPM providers are now active in the country (SAVE 2016b: 12). Over 80% of the CSOs interviewed reported that their projects have been monitored through TPM. Similarly, over 80% of donors, including all of the multilateral donors and government foreign aid agencies, reported that they have used TPM on at least some of their work in Syria. The amount of money spent on TPM in Syria is difficult to estimate, but the share of aid funds spent on TPM in other countries can provide a rough comparison. In Afghanistan, for example, TPM contracts are estimated at about 3% of total aid to the country (SAVE 2016b: 10). If 3% of Syria's $1.7 billion of annual aid is spent on TPM, the industry can be valued at approximately $50 million per year.

If 3% of Syria's $1.7 billion of annual aid is spent on TPM, the industry can be valued at approximately $50 million per year.

TPM is considered by some practitioners to be the "gold standard" in remote M&E methods (Howe et al 2015: 36). When compared to relying on local implementing partners to monitor their own activities, TPM has certain advantages. TPM staff, in theory, are neutral. The TPM does not have a stake in the project's success. If a project is judged to be doing poorly, or if corruption is identified, the TPM would theoretically not risk losing funding from the donor. Specialized TPM organizations can also devote resources towards training their staff in rigorous M&E methods. Further, TPMs will have sufficient access, as it would be a

requirement in awarding the TPM contract.

TPM visits usually collect data on observable outputs and brief qualitative interviews with stakeholders and beneficiaries. In this way, TPMs provide a "tick the box" approach to monitoring.[34] TPMs often present results as a spreadsheet of projects with green, yellow, or red flags indicating project status, although methods employed by larger TPM organizations are becoming more sophisticated, with an increased capacity to implement statistically-reliable surveys (SAVE 2016b; January et al 2015). Thus far, however, satisfaction with the quality of TPM data and reporting has been mixed. Although TPMs can provide useful feedback, some donors have been frustrated by the low quality of the written reports and are skeptical about the reliability of some of the data (SAVE 2016b: 16).[35]

TPMs provide "another set of eyes" to triangulate monitoring data received from implementing partners, but interviews with CSOs highlight certain costs and limitations of TPMs often overlooked by donors. First, TPM staff may not always be neutral: repeated visits to the same area or repeated contracts with the same donor may compromise the organization's impartiality (Howe et al 2015: 36). TPMs are also competing to secure donor contracts, which creates an incentive to report what the donor wants to hear. As one TPM staff explained, "Sometimes a client will not hire us again because they didn't like the results [on poor monitoring indicators]."[36] Due to the complexities of the conflict and the lack of coordination, donors are not able to assess potential conflicts of interests among their TPM partners.[37] As one interviewee put it, TPM is "conducted in the dark."[38]

Second, TPMs often require substantial resources from the organizations being monitored. An INGO staff member explained a common occurrence when dealing with TPMs that are monitoring the INGO's programs: "We have to help organize their visits and get them access to beneficiaries."[39] Other implementers commented on the time required to fully explain project activities to the TPM organizations.[40] TPMs often lack enough technical understanding of the project to design effective monitoring tools. Without

substantial engagement, TPMs could miss some activities, resulting in negative reports.[41] In some cases, TPMs are given the same monitoring tools used by the donor, but this approach can exacerbate survey fatigue as beneficiaries respond to similar questionnaires twice.[42]

Third, TPMs can damage the trust between donors and CSOs, as well as relations with local communities. For example, Howe et al (2015: 37) describes how TPM staff were seen asking questions and taking photographs in a community. Some beneficiaries became confused about the purpose of these activities and concerned about possible repercussions, and later refused humanitarian assistance. TPM staff are not always trained in humanitarian principles and may misrepresent themselves as staff of the donor organization. TPMs, as private firms with a profit incentive, may be willing to compromise their methods and findings to grow their client base.[43] Several CSOs working in Syria commented on the disruption caused by TPMs visiting their project sites, which created confusion among beneficiaries regarding the role of the visitors and often required CSO staff to spend time away from delivering aid to arrange logistics for the TPMs.[44] The results of TPMs are often not shared with the actors being monitored, which makes them feel like they cannot respond to criticisms.[45] This lack of transparency contributes to mistrust among the CSOs, who may question the TPM's motives.

Social Media

In recent years, access to mobile phones has increased in conflict-affected populations around the world. An estimated two-thirds of Syrians have access to internet through their smartphones. Even in IS-controlled areas, where smartphone use is heavily restricted, people can access the internet at cafés, which rely on satellite internet (UKAID 2017: 16).[46] Women appear to have similar levels of internet access as men, although there is little data on internet usage in many parts of Syria (UKAID 2017: 18). Approximately a quarter of the adult population uses Whatsapp and/or Facebook (UKAID 2017: 34).

OTHER COUNTRY M&E SNAPSHOTS

Donors in other countries are increasingly using social media feedback as part of their monitoring toolkit.

Iraq: A Hotline for Feedback

In Iraq, for example, UN agencies launched a nationwide toll-free hotline to provide information on what aid services are available and record complaints. Complaints and other information are then sent to the relevant officials (SAVE 2016a: 21).

Somalia: The Role of Text Messaging

In Somalia, the Somalia Stability Fund (SSF) uses an SMS-based system to collect both positive and negative feedback from beneficiaries of their funded programs. The feedback is geotagged and displayed on a web portal accessible to every organization that receives SSF funding. Organizations are assessed on how they have responded to beneficiary feedback in regular meetings with SSF investment officers.

This access allows the populations of Idleb, Aleppo, Homs, and elsewhere throughout the country to communicate their experience to the world. For example, local rescue volunteers officially known as the Syria Civil Defense, but better known as the "White Helmets", have used social media to document bombings on civilian targets and other war crimes.[47] Their smartphone footage of children and other civilians buried in rubble have exposed global audiences to the horrors of war. The fact that these videos and social media content are produced and distributed by Syrians themselves is exceptional. Although local populations in countries such as DR Congo, Sudan, and Afghanistan are becoming more active on social media, civilians there have not had the global reach of Syrians.

Social media plays two major roles in remote M&E in Syria. First, it has allowed INGOs to communicate more effectively with their local partners inside of Syria.[48] INGOs rely on the convenience and security offered by WhatsApp to recruit, train, and manage field staff, in addition to receiving monitoring reports.[49] The end-to-end encryption provided by the app ensures that organizational activities are not being monitored.[50] WhatsApp is occasionally blocked in government-controlled areas of Syria (UKAID 2017: 21), but is also occasionally blocked by the Turkish government, impacting cross-border activities as well as activities in Kurdish-controlled areas, which rely on Turkish internet (UKAID 2017: 21).

Second, and more importantly, social media allows local communities to provide feedback and information to donors, INGOs, and CSOs. An individual's WhatsApp number remains constant across networks and crosses international borders. As a result, WhatsApp is well suited to maintaining contact with displaced people and refugees (SAVE 2016a : 113). CSOs can use their own WhatsApp numbers like hotlines. By sharing these numbers during aid distribution and outreach, they provide an easy, low-cost way for beneficiaries to keep in touch, at least for beneficiaries with access to mobile internet (SAVE 2016a: 113).

This feedback mechanism increases the accountability of INGOs and CSOs to their beneficiary populations. An interviewee described a situation in which an organization in Syria provided food aid to an affected population. Some of the beneficiaries judged the supplies to be low-quality, and took photos on their smartphones, wrote a message to the INGO staff who funded the project, and posted on social media. The INGO followed up with the implementing partner, and eventually provided replacement goods of higher quality.[51] Social media provides a valuable means of providing feedback on CSO activities, but can also lead to frustration if remedial action is not taken.

World Food Programme's Mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (mVAM)

The World Food Programme (WFP) distributes emergency food aid to an estimated 1.4 million Syrians per month in all 14 governorates.[52] Understanding the nutrition needs of people across the country poses a formidable challenge. A monthly face-to-face survey in all 14 governorates is not feasible due to security and resource constraints. The mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (mVAM), a unit within WFP, overcomes this challenge through the use of mobile phone surveys conducted by trained staff in a call center located outside of Syria.

Phone numbers are generated through random digit dialing (RDD), ensuring that every Syrian with a mobile phone has a chance of being selected. To compute household statistics, the team weights survey responses based on the number of mobile phones in each household. Households with more mobile phones have a greater chance of being selected for the survey, so there is less weight attached to those responses. Responses are likely to be biased towards younger, well-off, urban households, but these imbalances can also be addressed through survey weights.[54] Since March 2016, mVAM has been contacting approximately 2,000 Syrians per month, and has successfully reached people in all 14 governorates.

Through these methods, mVAM is able to measure changes in the population's average food consumption score at the governorate level. Figure 2 shows an example of the unit's output from October 2017. In addition to general trends, mVAM is also able to identify specific types of food that are lacking in the population's diet. For example, the October report concludes that among the population of eastern Ghouta, "Inadequate consumption of haem iron-rich food continues to be the main concern among both displaced and resident households, with 40 percent reporting zero consumption of foods rich in haem iron in the week before the survey."[55] This information could then be used to tailor the composition of food aid provided by WFP in this specific governorate.[56]

By managing its own call center, mVAM's data collection does not place any burden on local implementing partners. Indeed, using RDD to generate mobile numbers means that local partners do not need to assemble call lists in specific areas of concern. By calling enough random numbers, mVAM is able to achieve an adequate sample size in each governorate. This approach, however, has limitations. First, the data can only provide population-level trends. Using RDD will never provide enough detail to understand the situation in specific communities or among beneficiaries from a specific aid project. Second, relying too heavily on mobile phone surveys creates the risk of a "blind spot", by only interviewing households that are well-off enough to own a phone and keep it charged. The most vulnerable households are missed by mobile surveys (UKAID 2017).

Figure 2. mVAM food consumption score (FCS) measures, October 2017

Mean FCS by aggregated governorates, May to October 2017
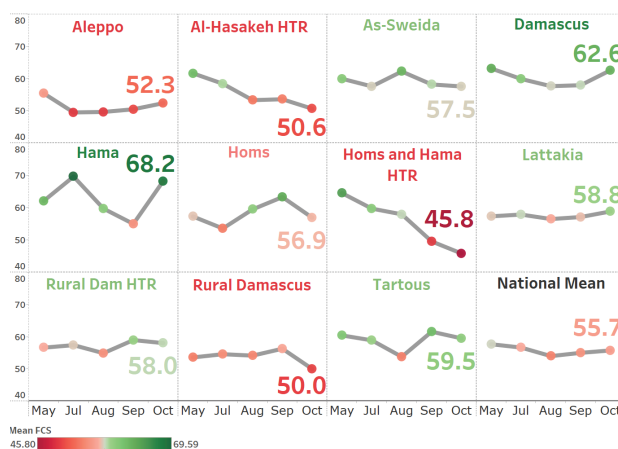
Mean FCS by aggregated governorates, October 2017
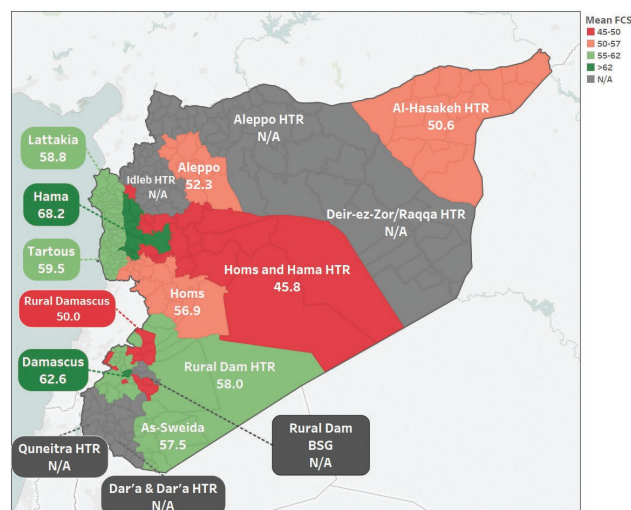
3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR REMOTE M&E IN SYRIA

While organizations have prioritized monitoring aid outputs, efforts to evaluate impact have largely been neglected in Syria. An increased emphasis on evaluations can contribute greatly to the humanitarian response in Syria, but to be successful, this should not place undue burdens on the already-overstretched CSOs and beneficiaries.

In the long-term, the biggest opportunity for M&E is for donors and INGOs to make a sustained investment, including both funding and training, to improve the organizational capacity of local CSOs in Syria. Although Syrian CSOs deliver approximately 75% of aid in the country, they receive less than 1% of funding (Building Markets 2018). With greater capacity, these local organizations would be able to actively seek out opportunities as they arise for more effective aid and more valuable evaluations, given developments on the ground. The level of education and tech-savvy among some Syrians means that with some training, local M&E officers would not only be able to implement rigorous M&E activities, but also innovate new M&E activities that are best suited to the local context. Perhaps more importantly, long-term relationships help establish trust between donors, INGOs, and local CSOs. This trust helps INGOs and CSOs overcome the delegation challenges inherent in remote M&E.

In the short- and medium-term, there are two opportunities for remote M&E in Syria that can provide useful feedback without requiring significant effort from implementing partners: mobile phone surveys and satellite imagery. Both have limitations but can nevertheless shed additional light on the impact of humanitarian aid activities.

Mobile Phone Surveys

Mobile phone surveys have expanded in use as a low-cost way of gathering statistically-reliable data, at either a national or local level (Leo et al 2015). Interactive Voice Response (IVR) surveys play a recorded message that instructs listeners on how to respond to questions, either by pressing the keypad or speaking into the phone. These surveys have proven successful with illiterate populations and can often be conducted for less than 9 USD per response. SMS-based surveys can collect responses to a small number of very short questions. These surveys tend to be most effective among respondents who are both literate and have received some guidance on how to complete them. When more detailed information is required for specific populations, call centers can be used to conduct in-depth interviews over the phone. WFP's mVAM unit, for example, combines IVR, SMS, and call center surveys for remote M&E activities in more than 20 countries.

In Syria, mobile phone surveys are currently used to inform the distribution of emergency food aid, and present an opportunity to measure access to education, shelter, water / sanitation / hygiene (WASH), and livelihoods. Every one of the donors, contractors, I/NGOs, and CSOs interviewed for this report was involved in at least one of these sectors. None of the organizations interviewed are currently using mobile phone surveys for needs assessments, program design, or monitoring and evaluation. The lack of mobile phone surveys is largely due to the specialized skills required to design and implement the surveys, and the distinct funding and management requirements.[60]

Mobile phone surveys of specific populations and beneficiary groups also have the potential to conduct evaluations in Syria using either IVR or call centers. To reach enough respondents these surveys usually require a list of phone numbers provided by implementing partners or other organizations. Ideally, mobile numbers collected by many different organizations would be compiled into a centralized database.

A centralized database managed by an organization with robust privacy protections would increase the sample size of the phone surveys, and also create opportunities for more rigorous evaluations of specific projects. Suppose, for example, that the database contained numbers for 1,000 unique beneficiaries of a shelter project in Aleppo, and 1,000 unique beneficiaries of a food distribution program also in Aleppo. These two groups, living in the same community but benefitting from different programs, can be surveyed to measure the impact of each project. The shelter recipients would become the comparison group for measuring the impact of the food distribution project, and vice versa.

Gathering mobile numbers for a mobile survey-based evaluation is a challenge in Syria. Beneficiaries and local populations may be reluctant to provide their mobile numbers to CSOs for fear they will be targeted or attacked, and CSOs may not want to collect mobile numbers out of concern that they will create suspicion

OTHER COUNTRY M&E SNAPSHOTS

Afghanistan and Somalia: Mobile Phone Surveys in Action

In Afghanistan, UNHCR and the World Bank have partnered with Viamo[57] and Orange Door Research[58] to collect real-time information on the welfare of returned refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Using a database of tens of thousands of phone numbers collected at aid distribution sites, a call center composed of five trained, full-time staff conducts in-depth surveys with approximately 2,500 respondents per month.[59] An automated quality-assurance process matches the phone records of the call center to timestamps and other metadata to ensure surveys were conducted with the correct respondent. This process also flags any unusual patterns of responses that might indicate low-quality or falsified data.

These call center surveys are combined with IVR surveys that use RDD to track employment, security, and access to services among the general Afghan population, which are then compared to observed trends. The results are displayed on a web dashboard, which allows UNHCR and the World Bank to understand the changing needs of the population and evaluate their activities. For example, UNHCR uses the data to understand how cash assistance is generally spent by the returnees, and whether the cash has improved their access to education, healthcare, and housing.

In Somalia, for example, SSF requires that every NGO that receives SSF funds collect beneficiary phone numbers. The resulting database, which expands with every new investment, allows SSF to communicate with target populations around the country, even in areas that have become inaccessible. SSF uses this database to collect feedback on I/NGO performance, decide how to allocate its funds based on local needs, and obtain data on whether projects have achieved their intended outcome. In Syria, the EU-funded Madad Trust Fund could implement a similar strategy.[61]

and mistrust. However, many CSOs reported they are already communicating with their beneficiary populations via mobile phone, Whatsapp, and social media. CSOs also indicated that local administrative councils (LACs) were often willing to participate in research activities, especially needs assessments that might result in further aid. Working with LACs to compile databases of phone numbers could lay a foundation for mobile phone-based M&E. Perhaps the bigger challenge is convincing donors, I/NGOs, and CSOs to share their numbers and coordinate their needs assessment and evaluation activities.

Aside from the difficulty of collecting phone numbers, mobile phone surveys have important limitations - they can only reach people who:

i. own a mobile phone;
ii. have access to a mobile network recognized by their SIM card;
iii. are able to keep their phone charged; and
iv. are willing to answer a call from an unknown number and respond to questions.

For population-level indicators, such as public opinion, these limitations are not such a concern. Ben Leo et al (2015) show that mobile phone surveys, when properly adjusted with statistical weights, can produce reliable estimates. Understanding need in a humanitarian emergency, however, requires a higher standard. Designing mobile surveys should be done in consultation with local partners to understand whether the surveys can adequately reach the target populations or not, and rely on other sources of information to triangulate the population's needs.

Satellite Imagery

Satellite imagery provides another means of monitoring and evaluating certain types of aid projects without requiring significant effort from implementing partners. Satellite data can be used to estimate population displacement, food security, livelihoods, and access to shelter and sanitation.

OTHER COUNTRY M&E SNAPSHOTS

Liberia and Sierra Leone: The Use of Satellite Imagery

In a study of Liberia's civil war, Nicholai Lidow (2016) showed how freely available data from the US government's LANDSAT program could be used to track changes in farming patterns as parts of the country fell under the control of various armed groups. These indicators, in turn, correlated with patterns of civilian abuse and food security and provide a way of targeting emergency relief and protection efforts, as well as measuring the impact of these efforts.

Figure 3 is a composite of infrared satellite images of the Liberia-Sierra Leone border taken between 2001-2003. The Mano river (center) marks the border between Sierra Leone (top) and Liberia (bottom). Green areas indicate crop land in 2001, red indicates crop land in 2003, yellow indicates villages and other non-agricultural areas. The predominance of green in Liberia indicates a dramatic decline in crop production during 2001-2003, which corresponds to a resumption of war. The opposite trend is observed in Sierra Leone, which ended its war in 2002. Less than 12 km separates two regions with dramatically different levels of humanitarian needs.

Figure 3. Composite satellite image showing changes in crop production in a border area of Liberia and Sierra Leone, 2001-2003.
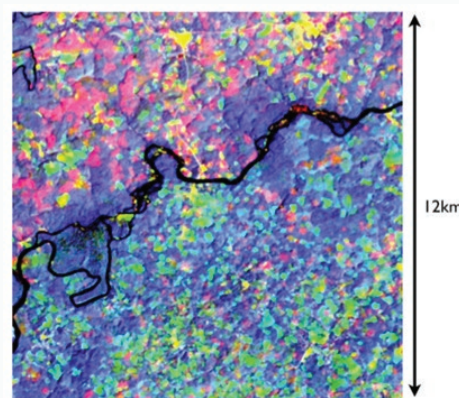
Source: LANDSAT, Lidow (2016).

In Syria, satellite imagery methods could be used to measure the impact of livelihood assistance projects, especially those involving agriculture. When Syria's conflict started, the agriculture sector was responsible for 17% of GDP and 655,000 jobs (Wind and Dahi 2014). Indeed, 43% of the NGOs interviewed for this report are involved in the livelihoods sector. Freely available satellite imagery and open source software could easily measure changes in cultivated land and crop yields at the village level. Comparing villages that receive agricultural assistance to nearby, similar villages that do not receive assistance would produce a simple measure of impact. Such measures would also provide an indicator of food security, helping humanitarian organizations to target their assistance to the neediest rural communities.

In the past ten years, private satellite programs have begun collecting imagery at a sub-meter resolution, which can be used to identify individual buildings, construction projects, crowds, and vehicles. Until recently, detecting changes through satellite imagery required specialized expertise, software, and substantial computing power. Now, however, companies such as Planet Labs[62] offer automated change detection as a standard feature in their services. These change detection algorithms can be used to automatically measure changes in the number of shelters in a displacement camp, the progress of construction projects, improvements in agriculture, and other aid-funded developments. These developments have significantly reduced the technical expertise required to derive insight from the data, but the costs can still be prohibitive. Fortunately, Planet Labs and Digital Globe have a history of humanitarian partnerships and are willing to provide data and expertise at low (or no) cost to humanitarian organizations.

Donors and INGOs have begun to incorporate satellite imagery into their planning processes. UNOSAT is a UN program focused on leveraging satellite data to better respond to humanitarian emergencies.[63] For example, UNOSAT has provided estimates of the number of IDP shelters in Mogadishu, Somalia,[64] and along the Syrian border.[65] UNOSAT can also rapidly assess the damage caused by natural disasters and military activities.[66]

Satellite Imagery in Mogadishu.

Driscoll and Lidow (2015) showed how satellite imagery can be used more directly for M&E activities, using satellite images of Mogadishu to measure intact and destroyed buildings to create a population-based sampling frame of the city, which was then used for rapid humanitarian needs assessments at the neighborhood-level.

In an environment as challenging as Syria, where monitoring is dangerous and evaluations are not prioritized, satellite imagery can provide a valuable source of data to triangulate observations and improve learning.

Figure 4 shows how high-resolution satellite imagery was used to assess damage at Aleppo's Great Mosque as part of a broader study of how Syria's World Heritage Sites have been damaged by the conflict (AAAS 2014).[67] Such imagery could be used, for example, to estimate the number of people waiting to receive food aid at a distribution site, or the number of trucks distributing the food. Such imagery could supplement, or even replace, some of the verification tasks currently conducted by TPMs at a fraction of the cost.

Figure 4. High-resolution satellite imagery for damage assessment of Aleppo's Great Mosque

4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research found that there is significant scope to expand and improve remote M&E in Syria, particularly to allow for a focus on impact, rather than just assurance that food and essential items have been delivered. In the long-term, the biggest opportunity is to provide increased funding and training for M&E capacity building among local organizations. The level of education, local insight, and access among some Syrians means that, with sustained support, Syrian organizations will be capable of not only implementing rigorous M&E programs, but also innovating M&E methods that are best suited for the local environment.

In the short- and medium-term, the most promising M&E opportunities involve mobile phone surveys and technology. These surveys allow for real-time data on the needs of the population, even in areas that are not currently accessible to aid workers. WhatsApp has proven to be a useful platform for communicating with refugees and displaced populations since an individual can maintain his or her WhatsApp number even after crossing international borders. Increased use of satellite imagery could provide indicators related to shelters, food distribution, access to services, and construction of clinics. Likewise, QR codes, currently used by the IRC and WFP to track the distribution of aid items, have the potential to streamline output tracking.

Remote M&E confronts the dual challenge of insecurity and delegation. Insecurity often restricts the types and quantities of data that can be collected, while delegating to local organizations and staff can reduce data quality. Ultimately, the risk threshold for remote M&E has to be lower than the threshold for delivering potentially life-saving aid.

Nevertheless, donors, I/NGOs, and contractors need to verify that aid is not being diverted and evaluate whether their projects are improving the lives of intended beneficiaries. They would also benefit from balancing their focus on monitoring process metrics and the spending of aid dollars with the actual impact of that spending. It is easy to get caught in the chaos of delivering aid without stepping back and determining the overall goal. Collecting valuable data is part of the M&E challenge, but using the data to improve operations is often much harder. Many large organizations, such as UN agencies, are characterized by inflexible bureaucracies and long budget cycles, which can prevent donors from acting on the insights obtained from M&E. As a result, the purpose of remote M&E is relegated to simply preventing public relations crises, rather than providing information to improve project delivery and better serve those in need. As one interviewee put it, "What is the point… if nothing changes?"[68] The most important aspect of any remote M&E is an explicit plan for how to act on the results.

The findings from this study lead to the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Donors should increase their direct funding and support to local NGOs and CSOs to improve local M&E capacity. Not only would these investments contribute to the local economy, they would spur the development of new, innovative M&E methods that are best suited to the local context.

The best long-term strategy for improving M&E in Syria is to invest and provide support to local organizations. These organizations have the access necessary for data collection, as well as the local insight to identify new opportunities for both program delivery and M&E. Syria did not have an established humanitarian sector before the onset of conflict, but the population is well-educated and tech-savvy. With sustained support for organizational development, not just program delivery, Syrian NGOs and CSOs will not only be capable of conducting rigorous M&E activities, but also innovating new M&E approaches that are best suited for the local context.

The returns to investing in Syrian NGOs and CSOs extend beyond collecting reliable M&E data. Sustained funding and support to local organizations provides a vital boost to the local economy, contributing to economic development. By funding these organizations, donors are essentially spending their development dollars twice, providing direct relief through program delivery and investing in the local economy. Donors, however, are not yet following this strategy. Although local CSOs deliver approximately 75% of aid, they receive less than 1% of funding (Building Markets 2018).

Recommendation 2: Donors, I/NGOs, and contractors should fund proof-of-concept projects to determine the best way to implement and scale technological innovations.

The IRC, WFP, UN, and others have pioneered the use of innovative technologies for monitoring their projects, but many more applications are possible. For example, satellite imagery could be used to estimate food security and access to livelihoods, such as farming. Mobile phone surveys could be used to understand gender-based violence or access to services. Both tools could be used to verify whether aid programs were delivered when and where they were intended to be delivered. Using technology to collect data remotely shifts the burden away from local partners. If deployed thoughtfully, these tools:

    a. reduce the reporting burden for field staff;
    b. decrease the security risks faced by local staff;
    c. improve the quality and reliability of data; and
    d. decrease the cost and time required to collect the data.

A greater use of technology for remote M&E can help balance the ethical and security concerns with the need for reliable data. There are, however, important challenges and limitations with these methods, which partially explain why they are not in broader use in Syria. The most vulnerable populations, those most in need of humanitarian aid, are the least likely to be reached by mobile surveys and the least visible in satellite imagery. Although satellites might be able to estimate how many temporary shelters have been erected in a displacement camp, they provide limited insight into the needs of the people seeking shelter there. Perhaps more importantly, these tools require specialized skills and often a new funding stream. Funding and managing a dedicated monitoring project creates bureaucratic challenges for donors. Creating a call center in Beirut to conduct mobile surveys in Aleppo, for example, cannot be simply added to the budget of a local implementing partner.

The best way to explore the opportunities of new M&E tools would be to fund demonstration projects. These projects would show how tools such as QR codes, satellite imagery, and mobile surveys can apply to Syria-specific use cases. Grants of $50,000 or less would be sufficient to apply these tools to specific challenges and identify the most promising use cases, which can then be scaled. Such small-scale grants could avoid the time- and labor-intensive procurement processes of major donors, allowing for faster learning and feedback.

Recommendation 3: The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs should establish a Syria-focused data portal consolidating donor, INGO, and contractor M&E reports, making anonymized, top-level data available to help track project implementation by district and sector. This portal could be an expansion of existing systems, such as Humanitarian Response and HDX, or a separate system that incorporates additional safeguards for participating organizations.

One of the most important insights from this study, and Building Markets' broader worker on the Syria response, is the difficulty of sharing information among donors and I/NGOs. SCR 2165 led to the creation of an information "firewall" between the cross-border and Damascus-based humanitarian operations. To maintain this firewall, NGOs have restricted the distribution of reports to other NGOs, donors, researchers, and the media. Such restrictions help maintain humanitarian access and protect local staff, but they come at a cost. Coordination and learning, difficult to achieve in the best of circumstances, become nearly impossible in this context.

OCHA is in a position to work with NGOs to decide what information is safe to share and provide an impartial online portal for distributing these reports. Several of our interviewees said their organizations are reluctant to share any M&E reports due to the "information firewall" established by SCR 2165 and fear that local authorities may target them if specific information on their activities were publicly available. By following a standard set of guidelines set forth by OCHA, NGOs can share (partially redacted) reports without fear that their humanitarian access will be compromised or their staff threatened. To be valuable, however, the portal should contain honest and candid reports about shortcomings in aid delivery. Humanitarian actors face a difficult challenge in Syria and some mistakes are inevitable. Improving information sharing and learning is the first step towards improving coordination, and ultimately impact.

Recommendation 4: Third Party Monitors (TPMs) should increase their efforts to demonstrate to donors and I/NGOs that they are committed to humanitarian principles. TPMs should also create standard procedures for communicating and sharing results with the NGOs being monitored, and reduce duplication of M&E efforts.

Third-party monitoring is a central part of remote M&E in Syria. Yet, several CSOs interviewed for this study expressed concern about how the TPMs operate on the ground, especially the potential damage caused by TPM staff who misrepresent themselves or violate humanitarian norms. Several interviewees expressed frustration that their organizations were not able to review and respond to TPM findings which, in their opinion, damaged relations with the donor.

Since it is still the early days of TPM in Syria, third party monitors have an opportunity to create their own professional standards. These standards should emphasize strict adherence to humanitarian principles and insist that TPM findings are shared with all stakeholders, including the CSOs being monitored. TPMs should also create a means for stakeholders to respond to these findings. Such standards will improve trust between the TPM and local CSOs. By creating a forum to address mutual concerns, TPMs can also help improve trust between the donors and CSOs, resulting in better project implementation.

These professional standards will impose costs on TPMs and the emphasis on protecting the rights of local CSOs may even deter some donors from funding TPM contracts. However, large TPM organizations would benefit from imposing a high-standard of professional conduct, since this standard would make it more difficult for new challengers to enter the industry. A reputation for integrity, even if it displeases some donors, will in the long term, help attract additional funding to the sector. If TPM organizations do not take the lead, donors or other actors may step in and implement their own standards.

TPMs should also reduce the duplication of M&E activities with the local NGOs and CSOs that are being monitored. Several of our interviewees claimed that TPMs often use the same questionnaires as the NGOs themselves. Although this redundancy provides a check on the data collected by the implementing partner, it misses an opportunity to expand the information available for M&E analyses. TPMs have an opportunity to act as a liaison between donors and local organizations and coordinate the M&E activities. This role could simultaneously reduce the reporting burden faced by local organizations and expand the scope of M&E. But playing this role requires a nuanced understanding of project goals and M&E methodologies, which has been a challenge for many TPMs in Syria. Developing such organizational capacity goes hand-in-hand with implementing stricter professional standards.

Recommendation 5: Donors, I/NGOs, and contractors should develop a deeper understanding and engagement with local administrative councils. These efforts will improve the international community's ability to leverage local capacity and expertise, while maintaining safeguards against corruption and diversion of resources.

Local administrative councils (LACs) are vital for aid delivery. These councils provide access to NGOs and CSOs and often play a major role in identifying beneficiaries. LACs could also be a rich source of mobile phone numbers and other community information. LACs contribute to the humanitarian effort, but also create risks for corruption and aid diversion. Currently, donors, I/NGOs, and contractors choose one of two strategies for working with LACs. Some allow their local partners to engage with LACs according to their judgement, provided that aid distribution is adequately monitored. Other donors do not allow their partners to work directly with LACs for aid distribution. A better strategy would emphasize understanding the local context. Stabilization actors already gather "atmospheric" information to understand LACs, including their political connections, incentives, relations with the community, etc. Some stabilization actors work closely with LACs to improve their monitoring. For example, they train LAC members to record videos of salary payments to police and local officials. By becoming better informed about LACs, donors, I/NGOs, and contractors could develop plans for engaging (or not) with specific LACs. Ultimately, LACs will become key partners for rebuilding Syria after the war ends.

ANNEX 1 – DEFINING REMOTE M&E

M&E seeks to measure and assess program performance with the goal of improving outcomes. Its definition is twofold: monitoring refers to "a continuing function that aims primarily to provide the management and main stakeholders of an ongoing intervention with early indications of progress, or lack thereof, in the achievement of results".[69] Evaluation is defined as "a selective exercise that attempts to systematically and objectively assess progress towards and the achievement of an outcome".[70]

In practice, monitoring tends to focus on the delivery of outputs, while evaluations tend to focus on measuring outcomes. Outputs are the tangible items distributed and activities conducted by an aid organization. In an emergency response, outputs include bags of rice, medical supplies, tarpaulins, drinking water, and other basic supplies. Outputs may also include activities such as training sessions. Outcomes, by contrast, are the changes caused by the delivery of outputs, such as a reduction in malnutrition or an improvement in literacy rates (e.g. Mills-Scofield 2012).

M&E activities typically employ one or more of the following methods:[71]

1. Site visits by international NGO staff and/or donors;
2. Reports by project staff;
3. Discussions / focus groups with communities, beneficiaries, and stakeholders;
4. Surveys (households / beneficiaries);
5. Imagery (photographs, satellites, drones);
6. Location tracking (GPS coordinates, QR codes, RFID tags);
7. Sensors (e.g. water or energy consumption); and
8. Hotlines and social media feedback.

For the purposes of this report, remote M&E is defined as monitoring and evaluation practices that rely on data collected or submitted without the physical presence of a program's implementing organization, staff, donors, or contractors. This definition does not imply the use of any particular tools or practices, nor does it assume any level of security risk. Looking at the list of M&E methods above, only the first, in-person site visit by international staff, is explicitly excluded by remote M&E. All other methods could theoretically be implemented by local partners or third-party monitors, although it is important to note that many of these methods require specialized training and a level of trust that may be difficult to delegate to a local partner.

In practice, remote M&E is only employed when acute access constraints prevent international staff from making site visits and meeting directly with beneficiaries. Access constraints often require compromises to the rigor of M&E methods. A household survey, for example, may not be able to reach certain communities or may be too risky to undertake at all. Innovative research methods and flexible planning, however, can often produce high quality data in insecure environments without exposing implementing organizations and their staff to unacceptable security risks. Still, remote M&E often involves a transfer of risk to local partners, and these risks must be carefully considered.

The biggest challenge of remote M&E is not security or access, but delegation. M&E activities must be delegated to those who have access, as most methods require data to be collected on-the-ground where aid is delivered. The fact that aid can be delivered at all means that access, however limited, is possible. However, relying on local actors brings its own challenges. Local organizations are not likely to have extensive training on M&E methods, and the limited direct funding to local NGOs makes it difficult for these organizations to improve their capacity. The incentives of local organizations are not necessarily aligned with the program's implementing INGO or donor. In order to attract contracts, partnerships, and funding, local organizations have an incentive to overstate both their degree of access and their

technical capacity (Carl and Chkam 2006: 28). They may also have an incentive to withhold information about any diversions or challenges, causing concern from donors, INGOs, and contractors about fraud and corruption.

These delegation problems are compounded by the lack of "basic information on who is doing what where," which is further aggravated by the multitude of donors, INGOs, and contractors responding to the Syrian crisis (Carl and Chkam 2006: 29). The volatile situation in Syria, with shifting territorial control, means that program impacts are often buried within larger shifts in the humanitarian situation. Population movements also make it difficult to evaluate impact on a specific population. IDPs flood into relatively stable areas, which changes the socioeconomic characteristics of project sites. In other areas, beneficiaries may leave if the security situation deteriorates. As a result, international actors tend to focus on monitoring program outputs, and how money is spent, rather than evaluating program impact, which is a lost opportunity for improving humanitarian aid (Howe et al 2015).

For the most part, the focus of remote M&E has often revolved around maintaining accountability to donors rather than the targeted beneficiary population (Stoddard et al 2010: 32). Recent innovations in technology, however, have created greater opportunities for more downward accountability to beneficiaries, and some donors are beginning to create formal systems for maintaining such accountability.[72] In the Syria context, these methodologies could be incorporated into M&E tools to improve the scope and efficiency of current practices.

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ANNEX 3 - ENDNOTES

1   See http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995 for a timeline of the conflict. Accessed 5 December 2017.

2   See: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/2017_hrp_syria_170320_ds.pdf

3   See: https://hno-syria.org/#sector-needs-overview

4   Non-state armed groups are defined by the ICRC as "distinctive organizations that are (i) willing and capable to use violence for pursuing their objectives and (ii) not integrated into formalized state institutions such as regular armies, presidential guards, police, or special forces. They, therefore, (iii) possess a certain degree of autonomy with regard to politics, military operations, resources, and infrastructure" (Hofmann and Schneckener 2011: 2). These groups, however, may be supported by state actors either secretly or openly.

5   Interview conducted 27 October 2017 in Gaziantep, Turkey.

6   Interview conducted 27 October 2017 in Gaziantep, Turkey.

7   Interview conducted 27 October 2017 in Gaziantep, Turkey.

8   This statistic is cited in Svoboda and Pantuliano (2015) and Building Markets (2017).

9   For the purpose of this report, the terms "NGO" and "CSO" will be used interchangeably to reference local Syrian humanitarian organizations.

10   Interviews conducted 23 October 2017 (London via Skype), 26 October 2017 (Gaziantep), 27 October 2017 (Gaziantep), 30 October 2017 (Gaziantep), 31 October 2017 (Gaziantep), 10 November 2017 (Istanbul).

11   Interview conducted 8 November 2017 in Istanbul.

12   Interview conducted 31 October 2017, Erbil, Iraq (via Skype).

13   See https://www.mercycorps.org/press-room/releases/mercy-corps-closes-operations-turkey. Accessed 6 December 2017.

14   See http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/03/inside-turkeys-ngo-purge/. Accessed 6 December 2017.

15   Interview conducted 24 November 2017 in Istanbul.

16   Interview conducted 9 November 2017, Amman, Jordan (via Skype).

17   For example, interview conducted 28 November 2017 in Ankara.

18   For example, interviews conducted 24 November 2017 in Istanbul and 23 October 2017 in London (via Skype).

19   Interview conducted 15 November 2017 in Istanbul.

20   Interviews conducted 26-27 October 2017, and 28 November 2017 in Gaziantep; and 8 November 2017 in Istanbul.

21   Interview conducted 11 November 2017 in Istanbul.

22   Interview conducted 27 October 2017 in Gaziantep.

23   Interviews conducted 26-27 October 2017, and 28 November 2017 in Gaziantep; and 8 November 2017 in Istanbul.

24   Interviews conducted 26 October 2017 and 27 October 2017 in Gaziantep.

25   Interview conducted 27 October 2017 in Gaziantep.

26   Interview conducted 13 November 2017 in Istanbul.

27   Among the CSOs interviews for this report, 53% reported managing funds from eight or more donors.

28   Interview conducted 31 October 2017, Erbil, Iraq (via Skype).

29   Interview conducted 27 October 2017, Gaziantep.

30   Interview conducted 27 October 2018, Gaziantep.

31   Interview conducted 31 October 2017, Erbil, Iraq (via Skype).

32   Interview conducted 28 November in Ankara.

33   Interview conducted 31 October 2017, Erbil, Iraq (via Skype).

34   Interviews conducted 26 October 2017 in Gaziantep and 9 November 2017, Amman, Jordan (via Skype).

35   Interviews conducted 29 October 2017 in Istanbul, 2 November 2017, Amman, Jordan (via Skype), 8 November 2017 in Gaziantep.

36   Interview conducted 26 October 2017 in Gaziantep.

37   Interview conducted 28 October 2017 in Gaziantep.

38   Interview conducted 28 November 2017 in Gaziantep.

39   Interview conducted 2 November 2017, Amman, Jordan (via Skype).

40   Interview conducted 29 October 2017 in Gaziantep.

41   Interviews conducted 30 October 2017 in Istanbul, 31 October 2017 in Istanbul, 4 November 2017 in Istanbul.

[42] Interview conducted 30 October 2017 in Istanbul.

[43] Although it should be noted that NGOs also have incentives to misrepresent their activities to please donors.

[44] Interviews conducted 2 November 2017 in Gaziantep.

[45] Interviews conducted 29 October 2017 in Istanbul; 2 November 2017, Amman, Jordan (via Skype); 8 November 2017 in Gaziantep.

[46] Security and privacy is also a concern in IS-controlled areas. NGO staff and civilians in IS-controlled areas are occasionally stopped by IS officials and compelled to show the chat histories on their phones (UKAID 2017: 42). Encryption is not able to address this issue.

[47] The organization has recently received widespread international attention and support after a documentary about the group received an Academy Award. See https://www.whitehelmets.org/en.

[48] Organizations also reported using Skype and other messaging / VoIP software. According to UKAID (2017: 34), 26% of Syrians use messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Telegram.

[49] Interviews conducted 23 October 2017 (London via Skype), 26 October 2017 (Gaziantep), 27 October 2017 (Gaziantep), 30 October 2017 (Gaziantep), 31 October 2017 (Gaziantep), 10 November 2017 (Istanbul).

[50] Although only the Syrian government has the technical capability to monitor internet activity, security and privacy is also a concern in IS-controlled areas. NGO staff and civilians in IS-controlled areas are occasionally stopped by IS officials and compelled to show the chat histories on their phones (UKAID 2017: 42). Encryption is not able to address this issue.

[51] Interview conducted 27 October 2017 in Gaziantep.

[52] See http://www1.wfp.org/countries/syrian-arab-republic. Accessed 13 December 2017.

[53] See http://vam.wfp.org/sites/mvam_monitoring/Methodology/read_me_syria.pdf. Accessed 13 December 2017.

[54] Source: mVAM Syria bulletin No. 18 (October 2017). https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000039510/download/?_ga=2.211926355.619531811.1513184482-1153001501.1458335617. Accessed 13 December 2017.

[55] mVAM Syria bulletin No. 18 (October 2017). https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000039510/download/?_ga=2.211926355.619531811.1513184482-1153001501.1458335617. Accessed 13 December 2017.

[56] WFP, however, may not be able to change its operations immediately in response to the data. Budgets are beyond the control of the WFP country staff and food supplies for distribution may have arrived months in advance. Nevertheless, the surveys provide valuable data for future planning.

[57] See http://viamo.io

[58] See http://www.orangedoorresearch.com

[59] The staff members are university graduates with previous experience with mobile surveys and/or call centers. The staff received three days of training on the survey questionnaire, as well as training from UNHCR on humanitarian principles. The call center manager has a degree in computer science and received additional training on data management and data security.

[60] These obstacles and how to overcome them are discussed more in Recommendation 2.

[61] See https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/eutf_syria_factsheet-english.pdf.

[62] See https://www.planet.com

[63] See https://unitar.org/unosat/.

[64] See http://unosat-maps.web.cern.ch/unosat-maps/SO/CE20130710SOM/REPORT_MogadishuCamp_Analysis_24November2013.pdf

[65] See http://unosat-maps.web.cern.ch/unosat-maps/SY/CE20130604SYR/UNOSAT_A3_Rukban_IDP_DensityMap_Landscape_20170921.pdf

[66] See https://unitar.org/unosat/maps.

[67] Source: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29255315. Accessed 13 December 2017.

[68] Interview conducted 31 October 2017 in Istanbul.

[69] UNDP 2002

[70] UNDP 2002

[71] SAVE 2016a provides a detailed description of various tools to implement these methods in the context of insecure environments.

[72] This is discussed further in Section 5.

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