

Accountability to Affected Populations in Limited to No-Access Zones

Many major humanitarian crises involving natural disasters or conflict can present significant humanitarian access problems. Barriers can include the absence of:

- physical access to populations or infrastructures due to geographical, political or conflict reasons
- adequate security
- time to consult population in life-threatening situations
- coherent social structures within displaced populations

In 2011 the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Principals acknowledged the fundamental importance of accountability to affected populations and endorsed five commitments placing it at the core of its emergency policy and practice:

Leaders of humanitarian organizations will undertake to:

Leadership/Governance: Demonstrate their commitment to accountability to affected populations by ensuring feedback and accountability mechanisms are integrated into country strategies, programme proposals, monitoring and evaluations, recruitment, staff inductions, trainings and performance management, partnership agreements, and highlighted in reporting.

Transparency: Provide accessible and timely information to affected populations on organizational procedures, structures and processes that affect them to ensure that they can make informed decisions and choices, and facilitate a dialogue between an organisation and its affected populations over information provision.

Feedback and complaints: Actively seek the views of affected populations to improve policy and practice in programming, ensuring that feedback and complaints mechanisms are streamlined, appropriate and robust enough to deal with (communicate, receive, process, respond to and learn from) complaints about breaches in policy and stakeholder dissatisfaction.

Participation: Enable affected populations to play an active role in the decision-making processes that affect them through the establishment of clear guidelines and practices to engage them appropriately and ensure that the most marginalised and affected are represented and have influence.

Design, monitoring and evaluation: Design, monitor and evaluate the goals and objectives of programmes with the involvement of affected populations, feeding learning back into the organisation on an ongoing basis and reporting on the results of the process

Working to implement these commitments can be particularly challenging when humanitarian access is limited or absent¹. For example, communication and information flow can be intermittent and difficulties can emerge in ensuring participation or representation; basic elements of an accountable response. In environments with very high security restrictions such as Somalia or Afghanistan, where traditional AAP methodologies might not be applicable, UN agencies and NGOs have been applying different approaches to engage with the people they seek to assist in line with their commitments on accountability. Remote management and technology based solutions are becoming increasingly common approaches through which better accountability to communities affected by disaster and conflict can be achieved.

This paper sets out some reflections on these efforts, offers case studies and presents some good practice examples and references regarding methodologies applied in particularly challenging environments, specifically in terms of:

- communication and information provision
- feedback and complaint mechanisms
- participation throughout needs assessment and monitoring activities

¹ OCHA defines **Humanitarian Access** as “the Humanitarian actors’ ability to reach populations in need and affected populations’ access to assistance and services”, <http://www.unocha.org/what-we-do/policy/thematic-areas/humanitarian-access>

The examples presented are intended as a guide to systems which, when applied in specific contexts, would need contextualization to local circumstances, such as levels of access, local frameworks and capacities, existing systems, etc. It is important to highlight that careful consideration of security and operational contexts - including risks and opportunities for the agencies, their staff and the communities - must be carried out when defining a minimal access strategy.

Table of contents

- 1. AAP within the Remote Management structure 3**
 - 1.1. Remote Management and Direct and Indirect Participation models 3
 - 1.2. Challenges and risks to AAP practice involved in remote management 3
 - 1.3. AAP in “Soft” remote management model - Stronger capacity of field staff 5
 - 1.4. AAP in “remote management” – Capacity building and monitoring of implementing partners 6
- 2. Communication and information flow in low access zones 7**
 - 2.1. Using Existing Structures to exchange information 7
 - 2.2. Technology based options for communication 8
 - Rebuilding radio as a communication channel in Afghanistan 10
- 3. Participative approaches and Information flow in the Project Management Cycle 10**
- 4. Setting up remote feedback and complaints mechanisms 12**
- 5. Conclusions. 13**

1. AAP within the Remote Management structure

1.1. Remote Management and Direct and Indirect Participation models

Remote management programming is a common practice in circumstances of extreme insecurity and limited access. Various models have been proposed and employed by agencies in contexts such as Afghanistan or Somalia. The models vary on the basis of the level of direct contact with affected populations². The most common practices belong to what has been referred to as the “**soft remote management**” model³. Such an approach is applied when responding in areas where international or non-local staff are not allowed: workers are employed locally, are trained and provided ongoing support and monitoring from the capital or the main office. Another management option, a further step removed from contact with the population, is the “**remote management**” model. It entails delegating the delivery of project activities to existing structures such as local NGOs, CBOs, CSOs, local networks or village committees which act as a “bridge” between the population and the agencies. In brief, where the agency has its own local staff present on the ground and the senior staff is based elsewhere, the management model can be defined as “soft remote”. If the delivery is entirely delegated to implementing partners it can be referred to as “remote” model.

Enabling participation is an underlying AAP concept which, through, for example, two-way communication, information provision, and giving and receiving feedback, allows affected populations to engage with the agencies and affect the way aid is delivered. On the matter of the involvement of the populations in the implementation of an intervention, Groupe URD and the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) suggest a distinction between Direct and Indirect participation⁴:

Direct participation means that affected populations participate as individuals or communities in the phases of a programme by coming in contact with the implementing agency through, for example, focus groups, partaking in decision-making, suggesting ideas for interventions, giving feedback, etc.

Indirect participation (or participation by representation) ensures community involvement through entities that are developed within or represent them (like NGOs, Community Based Organizations (CBOs), Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), partners etc), which participate in the intervention by, for example, organizing focus group discussions or surveying villagers, and which can be delegated some activities in direct contact with the most vulnerable populations.

Similarly to the remote management models, indirect participation seeks to create a “bridge” between the affected populations and the agencies supporting them when a direct connection is impossible. The model suggested by ALNAP shows how populations can be involved or can engage in participatory activities through the same remote management structures that agencies create to reach the affected population and deliver aid – whether it is distribution activities or service delivery. The same management “bridges” created to allow implementation in difficult settings could be used to implement AAP practices that enable populations to provide feedback, complaints, and participate with their voices in the design and implementation of the projects.

In cases where even such practice is not possible, some agencies have attempted to fill the gap through new communication technologies.

1.2. Challenges and risks to AAP practice involved in remote management

From an operational point of view, working in environments with low access can be extremely laborious and complex. Humanitarian access in contexts such as Syria, for example, means problematic freedom of

² The 2012 “*Monitoring and accountability practices for remotely managed projects implemented in volatile operating environments*”, Tearfund Report highlights five different models of remote management including a “soft” option, one working with a local or another international partner organization allowed in the area, contracting project implementation to a private organization, or supporting the local project community to implement and monitor projects

http://www.humanitarianinnovation.org/sites/default/files/remote_monitoring_and_accountability_practice_web_2.pdf

³ See the Tearfund report mentioned above.

⁴ http://www.alnap.org/pool/files/ga_handbook.pdf

movement at the least. An ODI report⁵ on the situation in Syria gives an example of how plans for the delivery of relief supplies accompanied by UN agency staff in Syria needed a notification in Arabic of the vehicle number plate and the names and nationalities of personnel involved 48 hours in advance for official approval. Such complex procedures can slow the delivery and hamper the response.

In specific AAP terms, many of the aspects of remote management pose challenges to its implementation⁶. They include and are not limited to:

- slower understanding of the local changing environments and slower processes in adapting activities and correcting bad practices
- slower reaction to feedback and complaints from the population or the staff due to layers between the population and the decision makers
- diminished participation and two way communication throughout implementation
- low information sharing, coordination and quality of data reporting
- lack of direct monitoring on activities and on staff performance directly affecting quality
- risks associated with involving affected populations, where the government or local political structures might be hindering access to them: any danger associated with their safety in communicating and exchanging information with the agencies
- senior staff lacking close relationship with the staff on the ground, limiting the chances of creating a positive communication
- lack of adherence to the humanitarian principles
- risks related to fraud

Such challenges need to be considered when assessing how to engage with a population in a remote management strategy. Although these operational constraints may seem to pose significant barriers to the implementation of high quality AAP practices and programmes, it is worth mentioning that agencies have tried and often succeeded in setting up minimum or more complex systems to reduce such challenges and to deliver projects accountably. Case examples presented in this paper demonstrate means for mitigating such challenges and risks. The peculiarity of each context demonstrates that the most appropriate measures are those that are tailored, taking into account local frameworks and their impact on AAP practices, as well as security and access levels.

Remote management and Accountability – Somalia example⁷

The remote management of many Somalia programmes often means that operations are controlled centrally from Nairobi. The lack of direct contact between Nairobi and the participants in the programmes has a strong impact on AAP practices. In UNHCR research carried out in Somalia, one of the problems recognized by most informants was that much aid is either diverted or re-sold. The practice of re-selling food employed by project participants could be considered as a coping mechanism. A different matter is when aid is diverted or re-sold by others. These can be powerful individuals claiming to be “community representatives” or authorities such as landlords who exploit the programme participants after they have received assistance. In this case, aid is not supporting the people in need, but rather the elites in power.

Agencies are using different approaches to challenge these practices in Somalia, where some have reported that as much as 60-75%⁸ of aid was being diverted away from the targeted population. Such claims are obviously difficult to verify; in itself a further illustration of the nature of the problem. Methods employed to monitor this include brief visits by consultants, agency peer-reviews, phone and video contacts, and picture evidence of deliveries and projects.

⁵ <http://www.odi.org.uk/events/docs/4907.pdf> Syria crisis: the humanitarian response

⁶ See OCHA, *Stay and deliver*.

⁷ <http://www.unhcr.org/4b2a035e9.html>

⁸ UNHCR <http://www.unhcr.org/4b2a035e9.html>, p. 15

1.3. AAP in “Soft” remote management model - Stronger capacity of field staff

The soft remote management model through locally employed staff underpins an investment in strengthening the capacity of locally based human resources. It is within this capacity investment that AAP competencies and practices can be embedded.

In line with the IASC commitment on Leadership and Governance, recruitment processes, job descriptions, staff inductions, trainings and performance management, could integrate reference to AAP. When recruiting staff working at field level, the Person Specification sections could incorporate previous experience or knowledge of AAP and participatory techniques. Such methods might include Focus Group Discussions, Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRA), participatory needs assessments, receiving and responding to feedback and complaints, sharing information about activities, etc. Where such capacity is low, training could be planned ahead. Induction and briefings on the IASC and/or the agency’s commitments on AAP and guidance on internal AAP policies will also support understanding of roles and responsibilities.

When access or insecurity demand specific measures or methodologies to be designed, staff working at field level should receive training on implementation. Specific monitoring, supervision and communication systems need to be put in place to allow senior staff to continuously assess practices and to support local staff in voicing concerns and discuss good and bad practices with their managers. In order to have middle or high management level national staff in remote areas, some NGOs have been appointing national staff from the Diaspora allowed to enter project locations.

Tearfund’s humanitarian programme in Afghanistan⁹

The Tearfund remote management model in Afghanistan is an example of a clear structure with constant and well established communication and monitoring systems into which AAP could be effectively embedded.

Shura is a traditional concept meaning “consultation of decision makers with those who will be affected by the decisions”. The Tearfund project in Kandahar has created a *Shura* office for its remotely managed projects. The senior programme coordinator is located in Kabul, and only local staff are based in the Kandahar office. Visits by national staff are undertaken on a quarterly basis, while international staff members reach the areas on a bimonthly to quarterly basis. The *Shura* office has been tasked with tightening decision-making procedures and controls, and putting in place a regular source of programme and project monitoring. The *Shura* model is organic to the Afghan culture, arising from and linked to traditional models of autocratic and consultative decision-making leadership structures. The *Shura* includes five members of senior local staff, based at the project location. They are required to meet on a weekly basis to facilitate communication between senior staff, share accountability and decision-making, set directions for the activities, and ensure implementation within directives and policies. The *Shura* members are expected to provide the minutes from their meetings to the senior programme coordinator, including any pertinent action points or recommendations. This provides the programme coordinator with a regular overview of programme and project progress, issues, and concerns, as well as the opportunity to engage in them. Communication and coordination are essential to Tearfund’s delivery of high-quality projects. The weekly *Shura* provides a forum for this on a regular basis and it is given a high priority.

The *Shura* structure could be defined as a “soft remote management” model where the senior staff based in Kabul constantly supports and monitors delivery in Kandahar. In such a structure, AAP could be mainstreamed through the same channels used for remote management. The field based staff could be trained on AAP frameworks and on the delivery of AAP specific activities, which could then be included in the ongoing work plans. AAP activities could be monitored through the same channels normally employed for project related activities. Information on feedback and complaints mechanisms, for example, could be reported on and analysed within regular reporting mechanisms, so that issues and good practices can be discussed, and clear action points deriving from them could be commonly agreed. Furthermore, adopting an Afghan cultural model within the structures of an INGO represents good AAP practice itself, as it utilizes local social structures to deliver programmes.

⁹ Tearfund 2012

Somalia: Tapping into the Diaspora network to help share information from and to the ground¹⁰

An INGO operating in Somalia achieved access by appointing expatriate Somalis to manage and monitor their programme in Somalia. Those chosen had previous organizational experience in other complex emergencies. In addition, they hold local network and context knowledge allowing them to regularly visit the operations and engage with all stakeholders. Although the INGO operates remotely from Nairobi, decision-making is informed by a more proximate and longer-term understanding of the operational dynamics on the ground. Risks in this approach are related to the possible existing connections and synergies of these diaspora and their families with local communities and governments. Such links must be carefully considered before choosing this approach.

Syrian diaspora to provide aid¹¹ – a system when AAP can be built on

The Syrian Diaspora has played a role in providing relief supplies to groups of affected populations within the country. The efficiency and professionalism of diaspora networks has grown so much that some INGOs that directly imported supplies are now able to successfully introduce them through these networks only. The purchase and supply of equipment and supplies has been rationalized and has also been confronted with sometimes adverse situations in regional markets. However, support networks originating in diaspora groups have carried the risk of being increasingly seen as associated with the opposition, regardless of their stance.

1.4. AAP in “remote management” – Capacity building and monitoring of implementing partners

Where access does not allow any of the organization’s staff to reach affected populations, operations can be implemented through partners, other local organizations or structures within civil society. In similar operating environments, support and monitoring of partners becomes a key role of the agency implementing through remote management. This is the case of agencies providing mainly financial, in-kind or technical support to other organizations and that do not directly take part in providing the assistance.

To assess the capacity of partners to deliver in line with AAP commitments, AAP capacity indicators can be included during partner selection. In some circumstances, and especially when responding to a crisis, some available humanitarian partners may not meet all technical standards of good practice, or may be unwilling or unable to comply with an agency’s commitments on AAP. In such cases agencies working through partners should evaluate the potential risk of working with these partners and letting them handle the delivery of activities in a manner that may not be accountable, or even harmful. Decisions can be made, and openly justified, when deciding whether or not to work through or with a certain partner¹². When limited options are available, flexibility needs to be applied in setting compliance norms for humanitarian partners. Potential partners can be considered and evaluated on the basis of their quality of delivery and their demonstrated commitment to AAP.

To address capacity building needs, agencies budget and plan ahead for financial and management support to strengthen partners’ AAP capacities. They support them in improving the quality and accountability of their work through training, joint exercises and monitoring on delivery. Furthermore, if access barriers require more specific or innovative techniques, agencies support their partners by providing budget for specific materials and training on its use.

When working through partners, robust monitoring systems need to be in place for agencies to ensure agreed standards of delivery are met. Stronger financial and time investment support the setup of such systems, especially technology based ones. Setting up these monitoring systems includes building on the capacities of those who will be carrying out monitoring activities, investing in their understanding of AAP principles, and practical examples of how aid can be delivered accountably. Both the agency and the partner’s staff should be instructed on monitoring against objectives and expected standards: context specific monitoring plans based on feasible AAP practices and relevant indicators should be designed from the onset of an intervention and shared and agreed with the implementing partners. Further information on monitoring is included in section 3 “*Participation in the Project Management Cycle in low access zones*”.

¹⁰ OCHA, “*Stay and deliver*”

¹¹ <http://www.odi.org.uk/events/docs/4907.pdf>

¹² Forthcoming 2010 HAP Standard Guide www.hapinternational.org

2. Communication and information flow in low access zones

One of the key elements of implementing AAP in difficult access environments is creating safe channels of two-way communication between a community and the agency. In remote management scenarios, this will typically be channeled through field staff, partners, organizations, or local social structures. When these are not available, accessible or trusted, other means of information provision can be utilised, such as technology based ones. Depending on the level of access and the political context, a number of tools are commonly used to communicate with communities, including, for instance, boards, flyers, newspapers, radio, SMS, and Internet¹³. Most of these means are less likely to be employed in low access zones as they require safe and physically accessible places to be put in place. In these cases, finding other means of communicating with the population becomes fundamental.

A checklist¹⁴ by Infoasaid assists the process of setting up context specific communication plans and to identify the most appropriate communication methods. It suggests a contextual analysis of the communities, their way of life, cultural beliefs and practices, educational levels, languages spoken or media. It also contains the ten key questions to be asked when planning a response (*Who is your target audience? What is the information you wish to exchange? How will you reach them? Have you considered time and location? What trusted channels of communication are working and available?*, etc). The Internews website¹⁵ also contains resources and case studies demonstrating how local media have been utilized and empowered worldwide to reach people with the information they need, allowing them to connect through suitable means to make their voices heard.

Where access is non-existent and even the assessment of the capacities and use of such communication systems and tools is hampered, information can be sought through secondary reviews or by employing creative measures. In needs assessments, for example, teams have collected information from multiple sources, including less usual informants and stakeholders: bus or taxi drivers moving in and out of no access zones, refugees, businessmen, etc. For further information on Needs Assessment Information collection, see section 3 *Participative approaches and Information flows throughout the Project Management Cycle*.

It is important to remember that people's safety should be one of the main issues to be considered when discussing involvement of the population in high risk areas. This is particularly important in conflict zones or where governments or power groups might not agree to this type of communication: in such environments, risks for the population associated with transmitting information to UN agencies and INGOs are higher. Finally, good AAP practice in all contexts is to seek the respondent's agreement on information collection activities, and inform him or her about the objectives of such work.

2.1. Using Existing Structures to exchange information

Although crisis might strain or even shatter traditional social structures, communities have their own coping mechanisms and, for example, have been noted to recreate links and connections through which information is shared and collected. An understanding of the existing or new structures will help agencies access those channels to collect and exchange information¹⁶. Examples of local structures that might be considered include CBOs, CSOs, media groups or even the diaspora maintaining links with local communities.

Collecting and sharing information through women's CBOs¹⁷ in West Bank and Gaza strip

While not a remote access specific example, this case study shows how local networks and structures can be involved for information collection and sharing at field level, and in the implementation such of information sharing mechanisms.

¹³ The Characteristics of Different Communication Channels:

http://www.infoasaid.org/sites/infoasaid.org/files/characteristics_of_different_communication_channels-1.pdf

¹⁴ <http://infoasaid.org/emergency-preparedness-and-response-checklist>

¹⁵ <http://www.internews.org/>

¹⁶ InfoAsAid Checklist: <http://infoasaid.org/emergency-preparedness-and-response-checklist>

¹⁷ <http://www.fao.org/Participation/selection-female-benef-lessons.html>

In a livelihood project in West Bank and Gaza Strip, women's Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) were invited by FAO to support information collection regarding the participants in the project. They reported to FAO the number of families and inhabitants in the community, their traditional working methods, and the problems they tend to face. The CBOs were then also involved in the sharing of the project details with the communities. Information was provided at community events (after Friday prayers for instance) and published in widely visible sources (newspapers, posters in the market, local shops, village council building, etc.). The local project committee, composed of members of women's CBOs, assisted FAO in choosing the final participants by providing information on applicants' social criteria and carrying out home visits on those who met these criteria to clarify their general suitability. These home visits were highly valued, and it was reported that the people visited felt that their application was given due attention, that the selection process was fair and transparent and even that community ties were strengthened as a result. CBOs were well-placed to report on any problems that may arise during the implementation of the project (such as misunderstandings, frustration or lack of motivation on the part of the population, etc.), given their close links with the participants and the community as a whole. CBOs provided collective support and motivation for the participants to commit to the project. FAO benefited greatly from the CBOs' local expertise and their position of influence.

Collecting information through the diaspora – a pilot for Somalia programmes¹⁸

In order to obtain more information about what was happening on the ground, an NGO in the USA engaged in communication with the Somali diaspora to capture the information accessed by Somalis living in the USA when contacting friends and families in affected areas. A survey of 10 questions was drafted, trying to capture the most essential indicators, and members of the diaspora community were selected by humanitarian workers and participated in training on basic survey and interview methods. The training also provided them with a hands-on introduction to an online platform where the survey results could be entered. The platform utilized in this case is the Ushahidi, (<http://www.ushahidi.com/>) an open source project that allows users to crowd source crisis information to be sent via mobile.

CAR crisis mapping¹⁹

The "Integrating Local Media and ICTs into Humanitarian Response in CAR" project is a collaboration between Internews²⁰, Ushahidi, the Association of Journalists for Human Rights²¹ in Bangui and UNOCHA–RCA and funded by the Humanitarian Innovation Fund²². This innovative system comprises a selected network of trusted local media organizations who gather real-time first-hand information from affected populations to create a two-way communication flow with humanitarian agencies to improve emergency response, community participation and community resilience. This new media and communications system aims at increasing the efficiency, transparency and accountability of humanitarian relief efforts and increase community resilience by leveraging the relationship that local media have with their communities while being strengthened in this task by technological solutions.

2.2. Technology based options for communication

Technology has been increasingly employed by agencies to support two-way communication, participation, and feedback and complaints mechanisms in extreme contexts. A review of existing data collection technologies was carried out by the NOMAD (Humanitarian Operations Mobile Acquisition of Data) partnership²³, including software systems, mobile phones, smart phones, PDAs, tablets as well as other data collection and sharing initiatives. Creative solutions have been developed depending on the context and the availability, seeking information channels directly within the local community via phone or text messages, or via the local media.

Depending on the type of emergency, populations affected by crisis will retain more or less access to telephones, mobile phones and the internet. Such communication tools can be considered as a means to reach

¹⁸ <http://irevolution.net/2011/08/04/crisis-mapping-somalia/>

¹⁹ <http://blog.ushahidi.com/index.php/2012/06/04/integrating-local-media-and-icts-into-humanitarian-response-in-central-african-republic/>, and <http://www.humanitarianinnovation.org/projects/large-grants/internews>

²⁰ <http://www.internews.org>

²¹ [Association of Journalists for Human Rights](http://www.associationofjournalistsforhumanrights.org)

²² <http://www.humanitarianinnovation.org>

²³ http://acaps.org/resourcescats/downloader/nomad_mobile_data_collection_systems_research/83/1347434662

the population in crisis, strengthen their participation and allow feedback and complaints. Clearly mapping the local access and use of mobile phones or the internet is fundamental as it has been observed - even in safer environments – that practices vary from population to population. In Bangladesh, for instance, mobile phones have been found to be much used, but text messages were not a popular means of communication and could not be employed to share information or provide a platform for complaints and feedback²⁴.

An assessment of the types of the existing local technology-based communication tools and how the population uses them can support agencies to consider the most appropriate ones to use. The Infoasaid checklist is a useful tool to carry out such assessments²⁵. Some options that have been employed in Somalia, Syria and Afghanistan include crowd sourcing, SMS and radio use.

Crowd Sourcing

Crowd sourcing is a type of participative online activity where the agency proposes to a specific group to share information via text or internet or through call, texts, emails, etc. It has been used to collect information from a central hub and map it online in crises contexts such as Syria or Somalia. An example of such web platform is Ushahidi (<http://www.ushahidi.com/>), an open source project that allows users to crowd source crisis information to be sent via mobile.

Limits to crowd sourcing exist when local access to internet is hampered due to the unavailability of internet connections and computers or conflict/censorship. In contexts where the governments play a strong role in how information is shared and perceived, this possible bias must be kept in mind when analyzing the data collected. Cross-validation or triangulation of information from other sources should be carried out as much as possible.

Ushahidi Crowdsourcing Tracker reporting crimes in Syria²⁶

The following example demonstrates how collecting information through modern Crowd Sourcing techniques can overcome physical barriers. This approach could be adapted to an AAP strategy potentially allowing project participants to communicate with agencies, inform them about on-the-ground situation, or even register complaints about projects.

Syria Tracker²⁷ is a crowd sourced effort developed to report crimes in Syria via direct web entry, through reports sent by email or by tagging tweets. Additionally, a Speak2Tweet²⁸ service has been adopted: it is a service developed by Google to accept calls from Syria, allowing voice messages to be left and automatically posted to Twitter. Since its launch in April 2011, Syria Tracker has been able to log 824 aggregate or individual reports, documenting, for instance, the number of individuals killed since mid March 2011. These reports are being verified by a group of volunteers from the Stand By Taskforce and the Ushahidi team which cross-validate information against other sources or posts and provide technical and program assistance.

SMS

The Infoasaid SMS context analysis checklist²⁹ supports the assessment of the mobile phones environment and the factors affecting the suitability of SMS and mobiles for communicating with disaster-affected communities. It includes questions, comments and possible actions to be taken when considering this communication tool. Questions include assessment of infrastructure damage as a result of the emergency, state control of the mobile network, and questions regarding communities' cultural level and handsets use (if women or men own the handsets, their literacy rates, etc.). Many agencies currently use SMS-based mechanisms to receive feedback (see Section 4 "*Setting ups remote feedback and complaints mechanism*) or to report specific issues").

²⁴ People talk by mobile in Bangladesh, but they don't text: <http://www.infoasaid.org/news/people-talk-mobile-bangladesh-they-don-t-text>

²⁵ See above, InfoasAdi Checklist: <http://infoasaid.org/emergency-preparedness-and-response-checklist>

²⁶ <http://blog.ushahidi.com/index.php/2011/05/24/syria-tracker-crowdsourcing-crisis-information/>

²⁷ <https://syriatracker.crowdmap.com/>

²⁸ <http://twitter.com/#!/speak2tweet>

²⁹ http://infoasaid.org/sites/infoasaid.org/files/infoasaid_frontend_sms_context_analysis_checklist.pdf

Frontline SMS and Freedom Fone in Kenya – an ActionAid and Infoasaid project³⁰

In northern Kenya, ActionAid provided monthly food rations to drought affected people in collaboration with the World Food Programme. Distribution of the supplies was handled by community members themselves through self-organised “Relief Committees”. The same woman who acted as Secretary of her local Relief Committee also joined a project being rolled out by ActionAid and Infoasaid. It aimed at helping combat food insecurity amongst communities affected by the drought using innovative technology – Frontline SMS and Freedom Fone – to transmit information simultaneously to multiple recipients from a laptop. 250 Relief Committee members were provided with mobile phones and solar charges as part of the project. Every Monday they received a list of livestock and staple food commodity prices from ActionAid’s Data Officer in Isiolo, and they transcribed the livestock prices to their local language on a bulletin, posting it on a notice board in the community. Community gatherings were then organized to alert people about the new information. Most people in the area are illiterate and the fact that the project provided a recorded message service using Freedom Fone allowed them to listen to local updates in Swahili. The market information allowed them to achieve better prices for the livestock when selling to traders. Aside from being useful for sending and receiving this type of information, the phones also proved to have other uses – such as reporting disease outbreaks. The project has also brought benefits for ActionAid in terms of reducing the time and costs of the staff travelling to and from projects.

Radios

Radios often continue to function during a crisis or are easily set up immediately. Radios can also potentially be highly interactive through live debates, discussions, phone-ins or text facilities, and therefore support two-way communication in line with AAP commitments. Infoasaid has prepared a feasibility assessment checklist³¹ to support agencies assessing whether and how radios should be used to communicate with crisis-affected communities in a humanitarian emergency. It includes basic information on local radio use, existing channels, whether communities or households have access to radio stations, or two-way communication systems (SMS, phone ins, etc).

Rebuilding radio as a communication channel in Afghanistan³²

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, accurate and timely information became essential to begin rebuilding Afghanistan during a period of political transition. However, due to a lack of media infrastructure and a literacy rate that is among the lowest in the world, Afghans all across the country had difficulty getting information about local and national issues. To add to that, the Taliban had reduced the number of people working in the state media and no legal framework existed for promoting independent media and protecting journalists from government reprisal. Since 2002, Internews has built a network of 42 local, independently operated radio stations throughout the country and trained journalists, many of them women. To address the lack of technical expertise in the country, technical advice and support was offered to all partner stations and transmission equipment was provided, as well as support in developing radio stations business plans. Currently, there is a pluralistic independent media scene that communicates with over 60% of the population and mechanisms for the population to communicate with the government. Such infrastructures can be used for information sharing and to strengthen participation and feedback mechanisms.

3. Participative approaches and Information flow in the Project Management Cycle

Participation throughout the project cycle is essential to delivering a relevant, effective and sustainable response. If access is difficult due to natural or political reasons, lack of information at design and delivery stage can result in projects not addressing or tackling the main needs and vulnerabilities. In volatile and quickly changing environments interventions might need to be adapted and flexibility is required to ensure relevance.

UN agencies and NGOs have been developing strategies to include the people they seek to assist at all stages of the project cycle management, from needs assessment to design, monitoring and evaluation, and learning.

³⁰ <http://www.cdacnetwork.org/public/content/frontline-sms-pastoralists-check-stock-prices-their-mobiles>

³¹ <http://infoasaid.org/radio-feasibility-assessment-checklist>

³² <http://www.internews.org/what-we-do/case-studies/afghanistan>

Alternative channels or sources of information have been employed and some examples at the needs assessment and monitoring stages are presented below.

Needs Assessment or Situation Analysis

Creative measures of data collection at the needs assessment stage have been employed in contexts— such as The Gaza Strip, Libya or Syria – where access was hampered by conflict. In areas where UN agencies or INGOs were not allowed to enter, technology has been used to reach the population, or “mobile” informants – people who move in and out of those areas – have been involved to collect information. For example, interviews have been carried out at the borders of these areas with displaced people, refugees or their families, and taxi/bus drivers. Diaspora living abroad, foreign journalists or businessmen have been addressed to collect further information on the situation on the ground, and snowball sampling³³ has been employed as a methodology to reach those who hold the most relevant information where social patterns were shattered and clear identification of key informants was impossible³⁴.

Collecting data on Libya – OCHA in Tunisia Choucha Camp³⁵

In March 2011, a team of field staff from OCHA, UNDAC, ECHO, ASB Germany, ACT Alliance, Caritas, Muslim Hands, Muslim Charity, Save the Children, International Rescue Committee and ADRA, conducted 300 random interviews of male migrants and families of migrants in Choucha camp - 50 Kilometers from the Libyan border. The aim was not only to assess the camp situation, but also to gather information on the Libyan humanitarian situation. The assessment within the Tunisia border collected information on employment in Libya during the conflict, fighting (including information on children or youth as soldiers), food prices and increases, and health facilities functionality.

Random sampling through the phone directory in Gaza³⁶

CARE, in partnership with Alpha International surveying firm, conducted a three-day phone survey of families in the Gaza Strip to gather basic data on the humanitarian needs, such as the status of electricity, water and sewage systems, the impact of cash, food and medicine shortages, and the condition of displaced people sheltering with families or neighbors. CARE initiated this survey during the conflict in order to get an immediate picture of the humanitarian needs. The sample for the survey included 525 people throughout the Gaza Strip aged 18 years and above. Respondents were selected using stratified random sampling from the Palestinian phone directory, mostly landlines. Results from the survey were therefore limited to respondents who had working phone lines, but still allowed a clearer idea of the needs on the ground.

Monitoring

Monitoring is a continuous observation of practices aimed at improving delivery. Limited or low access zones can pose a number of issues to its implementation. Physical access can stop monitoring staff reaching the project areas, while political circumstances can hamper transparent and objective observation.

In a “soft remote management” structure the staff dedicated to monitoring of AAP should be fully capable of observing and assessing accountability according to agreed indicators. Where the monitoring staff cannot reach the project sites, a good practice is to engage local stakeholders or local structures to give feedback on specific activities through monitoring visits or observation – similar practices go hand in hand with the participation principles of AAP. Such methodologies include “*third party monitoring*”, “*triangulated local monitoring*” and “*web based monitoring*” and underpin the development of user-friendly and context specific tools to enable other parties to observe and collect information on specific AAP practices.

Monitoring strategies on AAP practices – Tearfund report 2010³⁷

Quality assurance team for remote management accountability³⁸: An INGO in Afghanistan has established a

³³ A non-probability sampling technique where existing study subjects are asked to recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances. This technique is often used in hidden populations which are difficult for researchers to access, such as drug users or sex workers.

³⁴ <http://www.acaps.org/>

³⁵ <http://www.assessmentlibya.org/>

³⁶ <http://www.care-international.org/Media-Releases/care-assessment-89-of-respondents-in-gaza-say-they-have-received-no-humanitarian-assistance.html>

³⁷ http://www.humanitarianinnovation.org/sites/default/files/remote_monitoring_and_accountability_practice_web_2.pdf

team composed of national staff who have access, complemented by senior national staff travelling to monitor programme activities. The team members are highly skilled national staff from different technical sectors who are not part of the programme line management and who travel and monitor to assess. The team's work is structured on an indicator-based terms of reference to ensure an objective means of monitoring and assessment.

Third party monitoring: WFP, UNHCR, and some other agencies have been using third party monitoring in a number of contexts, including Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia. In Afghanistan, WFP uses three outsourced monitoring firms (two Afghan companies and one based in Dubai). These companies provide non-UN personnel who work on what WFP calls Program Assistance Teams (PATs) that can go into UN 'no-go' areas and monitor the distribution outcomes.

Triangulated local monitoring: In areas where access is impossible for its national and international staff alike, an INGO has used a combination of vendors, local government officials, and community members for programme quality and accountability assurance, wherein all parties have to sign off on each project activity. Peer monitoring, including affected populations, donors, local project management staff – have also been involved in such activities.

Web-based remote project monitoring: As a response to the complex security environment, UNHCR has developed the Project Tracking Database—a computer system to monitor project activities undertaken by local partners in Iraq. For example, rather than sending staff out to verify whether houses are being built, the local partners take pictures that are uploaded with GPS info. Evidence-based monitoring of construction, costs, and deliveries takes place before, during, and after construction, and payments are tied to the photographic evidence. There are 10,000 projects in Iraq currently on the database. A similar system could be used for distributions or other types of projects.

4. Setting up remote feedback and complaints mechanisms

Remote feedback and complaints mechanisms such as phone lines, SMS texting and emailing are common systems to allow the population to voice their opinions to implementing agencies and can also be set up in particular contexts where access is a major issue and volatile environments where special consideration should be placed in ensuring safety of the people giving feedback.

Issues around remoteness and speed of response to complaints or feedback are stronger when the senior or decision making staff are removed from the action. This can be mitigated through the creation of stronger structures or spaces (such as targeted weekly recurrences) dedicated only to the sharing and analysis of feedback and complaints between the field staff and the decision makers. Delegation of authority to partners should be equally monitored especially when handling feedback responses and in particular sexual abuse and exploitation cases.

Feedback mechanisms via SMS – Somalia example³⁹

The "SMS Beneficiary Feedback" allowed the population to give feedback about projects funded or services provided by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in Somalia using SMS. The feedback system aimed at finding out how and if the participants in the DRC programme were actually satisfied by the services provided to them and what could be improved. Once the SMS reached the central server they were translated into English and channeled to the right department/office inside the organization. Each message was reviewed and answered. The team delivered the response via SMS or through a call. This process is documented step by step on the Ushahidi platform⁴⁰, where all SMS are mapped and all responses/commentaries are shown.

A specialized local professional travelled to the project areas to explain to the population the planned activities, the SMS feedback system and its possible outcomes. Having a staff member actually meeting the communities in person ensured clarity on the aim and scope of the text messaging service and allowed a

³⁸ OCHA, Stay and deliver

³⁹ <https://crisismapper.wordpress.com/2012/06/18/the-very-first-humanitarian-customer-calling-center/>

⁴⁰ <http://somcdrd.org/hif/>

better management of their expectations.

Reporting on sexual violence in Syria via internet and online mapping⁴¹

The aim of this project by Women Under Siege is to collect some stories from Syria as they happen, with as much accuracy as possible. The Ushahidi crowd sourcing technology allows survivors, witnesses, and first-responders to report sexual violence and their consequences, including mental health issues and pregnancy. Reports of rape, sexual assault, and groping are continuously gathered via email, Twitter, or directly to the site. A map points to where the attack happened while deeper context is included in reports. Reports are anonymous and they include rapes carried out by soldiers. As part of the collection and verification process, the project is collaborating with a professor and epidemiologist at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and a student at the Mailman School. Syrian activists living outside the country, as well as various journalists and human rights and aid workers working with refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey are also working on the project. Stories are collected also from relatives and friends, news reports and Facebook. This crowd mapping method of information-gathering allows the voices of the victims to be heard across the ether and remain anonymous. By plotting each story on a map, valuable data is gathered to detect the vital signs of the Syrian conflict zones.

5. Conclusions

Limited or no access zones pose a challenge to agencies committed to accountability. INGOs and UN agencies have been trying to embed AAP practices such as participation through two-way communication, information provision and collection in remote management structures, and setup of innovative mechanisms to involve populations at all stages of the project cycle.

Main considerations for agencies wanting to implement responses under the AAP principles in limited access zones include:

- Accountability to affected populations can be mainstreamed in common remote management practices.
- A combination of remote management and technology-based solutions might support AAP practices.
- An investment in field staff or partner capacity on AAP organizational frameworks, AAP systems and their monitoring is key.
- Careful analysis of the context, exploring existing spaces and structures, or creating new ones through which to engage with the population, are the first starting points to allow agencies to find the most appropriate and safest ways to mainstream AAP.
- Integrating sources of information and cross checking them might support a more comprehensive understanding of what is happening on the ground where direct access and monitoring is impossible.
- AAP systems should be tailored to the context and evaluated on the basis of risks for the organization, staff, partners, and the population.
- Investment on technology-based options for communication and monitoring (such as phones, satellites, SMS servers, phone lines, online platforms, etc.) should be planned and budgeted for at the design stage in low access zones.
- Creative solutions can support agencies to embed AAP approached within their response.

Further considerations will arise when analyzing the local situation, the urgency of the response, the organizational presence in country, or its capacity, however the examples presented here could be considered as a basis for creating context-tailored solutions.

⁴¹ <http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org/blog/entry/the-cartography-of-suffering-women-under-siege-maps-sexualized-violence-in>

Resources:

Monitoring and accountability practices for remotely managed projects implemented in volatile operating environments - A 2012 report by Tearfund

http://www.humanitarianinnovation.org/sites/default/files/remote_monitoring_and_accountability_practice_web_2.pdf

Community feedback and complaints mechanisms: early lessons from Tearfund's experience

<http://www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-52/community-feedback-and-complaints-mechanisms-early-lessons-from-tearfund-experience>

Infoasaid - Infoasaid's goal is to improve the quality of humanitarian assistance through enhanced information exchange between crisis-affected populations and aid agencies.

<http://infoasaid.org>

The CDAC (Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities) Network - The CDAC Network advocates for changed priorities - and hence capabilities - in the humanitarian system, aiming towards a two-way communication among individuals, organisations and inter-agency processes, becoming a predictable and consistent element of preparedness and humanitarian response efforts.

www.cdacnetwork.org/

Stay and Deliver – An OCHA report on Access and Operational, Management and Accountability constraints

http://ochanet.unocha.org/p/Documents/Stay_and_Deliver.pdf

Afghanistan: A Case Study – an ODI case study on remote management

<http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/7615.pdf>

Creating Humanitarian Space: a case study of Somalia – an UNHCR Case study on Somalia response

<http://www.unhcr.org/4b2a035e9.html>

Summary of Syria crisis and the humanitarian response, with recommendations on working with the SARC, addressing access versus advocacy, engaging with the Syrian government – ODI research on Syria response and Participation

<http://www.odi.org.uk/events/docs/4907.pdf>

Applying conflict sensitivity in emergency response: Current practice and ways forward

<http://www.odihpn.org/hpn-resources/network-papers/applying-conflict-sensitivity-in-emergency-response-current-practice-and-ways-forward>