# Frequently Asked Questions

## Mobile Phone Solutions and Remote Tool Considerations for M&E in a COVID-19 Environment

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### FAQ SECTIONS:



### INTRODUCTION

On June 10, 2020, the USAID-funded IDEAL Activity convened the online event, Mobile Phone and Remote Tool Considerations for M&E in a COVID-19 Environment, to discuss promising practices for mobile phone and remote tool application for M&E for food security activities. The IDEAL team compiled questions, comments, and resources that panelists shared during the event to develop this FAQ. Discussants for the event included:

- Arno Bratz *(panelist)* | Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Manager | Mercy Corps
- Mehari Belachew *(panelist)* | Head, Survey Services | KIMETRICA
- Amina Ferati *(panelist)* | President | International Advisory, Products, and Systems (i-APS)
- Tom Scialfa *(facilitator)* | Senior Technical Lead - Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning | Mercy Corps

If you have questions related specifically to qualitative M&E in the time of COVID-19, please refer to our Qualitative M&E for Food Security Activities during COVID-19 FAQ.

### PREPARATION

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#### How can programs adapt their monitoring strategies?

- **Arno:** We have two basic considerations: first, we need to understand what are the possible monitoring options that we can choose from, and then second, how can we choose the appropriate right fit method. The first step for us is to know who we need information from, e.g. farmers. Then we can get this information from farmers, but also potentially from extension agents or producer organizations and other actors farmers interact with. Based on that, we can now select different types of methods – a key informant interview, a remotely facilitated survey, and so on. The second piece is identifying how to select the appropriate method. In FSP, we figured the easiest way to go about it is to say an appropriate method has to be fast, feasible, and precise.

### DATA COLLECTION FOR HARD-TO-REACH PLACES

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#### How can you reach participants in low-connectivity environments who might not have access to a phone?

- **Tom:** In some cases, it may be necessary to provide households with phones, tablets, or other electronic devices that they can borrow in instances where they do not have access to a phone. Another option is to identify a community focal point who can lend a phone to the interviewee (making sure COVID-19 safety precautions are followed). Where vulnerable populations (e.g. low socio-economic status, living in areas without connectivity, etc.) are not be able to participate via phone, use key informant interviews when possible and account for these adjustments in monitoring reports.

### How do you approach data collection in non-permissive environments where phones with GPS or paper-based methods might attract unwanted attention?

- **Arno:** Where data collection poses humanitarian protection risks for people's lives and safety, we should abstain from it. Where the benefits of data collection for effective humanitarian action and accountability outweigh the risks, the least technologically sophisticated method possible that keeps respondents safe is usually the best-fitted option because it draws less attention. Where network surveillance is a risk, encrypted calls and chats with self-destruction timers can be an option to avoid risky physical contact.
- **Amina:** As we explain in our Guide on Monitoring and Evaluation in Limited-Resource Settings in the COVID-19 Context, we recommend conducting a risk assessment prior to conducting any activities, looking at cross-cutting issues of people, access, and communication. It's absolutely critical to work with local staff who have relationships with local stakeholders and can effectively coordinate and secure required permissions. We also think about what the penetration of phone ownership is in the area. For example, an area with low phone ownership might have a few individuals/community leaders with phones. In that case, with coordination with community leaders, providing a phone to a community focal point might not raise red flags the same way that sending dozens of phones might. We also have to remember that in some areas, paper has always been one of the best ways to conduct surveys, with the same caveat of working with local staff.

## SAMPLING

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### How do you determine appropriate sample size?

- **Arno:** The primary consideration is whether we need to sample for variance or representativity. Representative samples are incredibly difficult in a context like Kivu so we think about the option of providing phones to participants simply because the phone penetration rate in South Kivu is so low. For context monitoring, it is usually sufficient for us to use a random sample of participants if we have the phone numbers already or know who those participants are. This can allow us to reduce the numbers because we don't have to factor in design effects. The sample size would usually be within a 10% margin of error which, depending on the specific type of variables and indicators we track for context monitoring, would bring us to a rough sample size of around 100 participants for key informant interviews. To account for variance, we would make sure to triangulate between different types of key informant sources, especially to prevent gender bias in respondents (many key informant interviews tend to be representatives of power structures, and in our context tend to be male and on the older side, so we try to counterbalance that).
- **Mehari:** Since we are conducting panel studies, we can't afford to lose many households. We assume a 10-15% non-response rate. If the non-response exceeds this, we go for a face-to-face interview with all the necessary COVID-19-related precautions and secure approval from local authorities.

## PHONE SURVEYS/INTERVIEWS

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### What steps should programs take when shifting from in-person to phone surveys?

- **Arno:** The specific steps may depend on what processes and technologies were in place prior to switching to phone interviews. As a general heuristic, six steps should be considered: scope, redesign, platform choices, retooling, respondent lists, and field quality controls.

Scoping involves understanding whether phone surveys are feasible at all from a security standpoint, what parts of a population have access to phones, and what networks are available. Based on this, if phone surveys appear to be the best option, the survey design will need to be adjusted. This may include collecting less data if possible, adjusting the sampling design towards convenience sampling or random sampling, or increasing sample sizes to account for higher non-response rates. Third, it should be decided what platforms should be used for phone interviews. Programs that already use electronic data collection will typically be best placed to continue using the same platform if web forms are available. Fourth, the survey tools will likely need to be rewritten. The main challenge is to keep them as short as possible and separate out modules into different tools if the survey is still too long. Fifth, respondent lists need to be prepared. If participants' phone numbers are not yet known, there will need to be an in-person data collection of demographic and contact data before the phone interviews start. An alternative solution is to identify village-level focal points who lend their phones to other participants. Sixth, additional field quality controls should be implemented to cope with the data quality challenges arising from phone interviews. We have prepared a basic checklist in English and French that can serve as a starting point.

## What is the recommended length for phone interviews?

- **Arno:** There are lots of 'rules of thumb' that float around; in the development/emergency contexts, using mobile surveys is new. In the last month, I've seen surveys from 10 minutes to 45 minutes, the intention being to keep the respondent engaged for quality responses while considering air time and electrical limitations. If your survey is part of a panel study and households have rapport with the enumerators from prior rounds, then we've found you can have more wiggle room and respondents are willing to stay on the phone for longer (approximately 45 minutes).
- **Amina:** It depends on a lot of factors. One is whether the interviewees are part of the sample or general population because that's going to impact the person's willingness to do a survey of which they have potentially no vested interest. If you have a panel that you have surveyed repeatedly, then we've found you can use a bit of a longer survey. It is also important to conduct internal testing to figure out how to orient the survey and the complexity of the questions.
- **Mehari:** The type of respondent may also make a difference – young and educated respondents might be faster. Thirty to 45 minutes is an ideal suggestion, but the interview might be shorter or longer depending on the nature of the respondent.

## What strategies can help overcome respondent survey fatigue?

- **Amina:** For us at i-APS, we split surveys into modules, aiming for no more than 15 minutes for each module. Order the modules from most critical to least.
- **Arno:** We have found that panel interviews tend to work slightly better because we have pre-existing relationships with the respondents. If there is a possibility to build those relationships before switching to remote monitoring, that can help increase the response rate.

## How does data collection via phone compare to in-person data collection in terms of cost?

- **Arno:** The cost of data collection is highly context-specific. As a rule of thumb, when switching to phone surveys, enumerator costs remain stable due to the reduction in travel time and the increase in time spent on interviews due to comprehension issues.
- **Amina:** Phone can often be the same cost or higher, especially when just shifting from in-person to phone, due to additional trainings that are usually required, adapting tools/methodology to phone, obtaining phones, arranging for airtime, etc. Additionally, we find that we often have to budget for additional days of training and supervision protocols. Over time, costs can be reduced by having teams who are dedicated and trained on phone interviews.
- **Mehari:** Given the poor road network and security-related movement difficulties in some areas, transportation costs constitute a significant portion of survey budgets in Africa. Therefore, data

collection via phone can have a cost advantage compared to in-person data collection when conducting light surveys with interview times of less than one hour.

### Can you integrate other programming activities with over-the-phone data collection processes?

- **Tom:** Using the contact/sample listings of individuals, households, or organizations, it is possible to integrate other programming activities using methods and processes established for over-the-phone data collection, but there are several factors to take into consideration. If the purpose of the data collection is routine monitoring, for example, the duration of the interview is likely short and it might be feasible to complement the interview with additional programming activities. Interviews should be conducted first as to avoid potential bias. If the purpose of the data collection is a formative assessment or evaluation, however, it may not be advisable to combine data collection and programming activities.

  Note that surveys can and should include a message at the end about COVID-19-related safety, such as the importance of hand-washing and social distancing.

### How many times should an enumerator attempt to reach a participant on the phone?

- **Mehari:** We plan for five attempts to reach a person before we remove the person from the contact list.

### What time of day are participants most available for phone interviews?

- **Tom:** Availability depends on so many factors, making it difficult to generalize a response. Factors such as employment, religion, cultural habits, number of young children, crop calendar, marital status, geographic location, etc. all play a role. If your project has been running for a while, your program team members will probably know your participants well enough to be able to suggest times and days when it is not advisable to conduct an interview.
- **Mehari:** The best and most effective way to secure an ideal time is to call the households and fix the interview date and time based on the convenience of the household (and not the convenience of the interviewer).

### Can phone surveys be used for baseline and endline data collection?

- **Mehari:** Baseline and endline surveys are usually cumbersome. I do not recommend phone data collection for baseline and endline surveys unless it is absolutely necessary, in which case the survey should designed to make it as respondent-friendly as possible.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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### How can you most effectively manage feedback and complaint responses?

- **Tom:** Effective management of feedback and complaints is not unique to COVID-19, but during COVID-19, it may very well be that there is an increase in the number of feedback/complaint messages. Regularly documenting the volume, nature, and time of day of the calls (if phone-based) is important to determining when extra human resources are needed to manage feedback and complaint mechanisms.

### When using in-person coordination for remote data collection, what safety precautions should be considered?

- **Mehari:** We do not send anyone from outside the area where the survey is being conducted. We tell anyone assisting with coordination to follow COVID-19 precautions, including social distancing.
- **Amina:** Similar to Mehari, we only work directly with people from the community where data collection or the program activity occurs. In addition, we provide personal protective equipment and appropriate training for any person who will be providing in-person coordination, including how to adhere to social distancing. Our Guide on Monitoring and Evaluation in Limited-Resource Settings in the COVID-19 Context provides examples of this.

### How do you manage informed consent for phone surveys?

- **Amina:** We rely on resources from J-PAL that provide great best practices for conducting phone surveys, including gaining informed consent.

## DATA QUALITY

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### What strategies exist for verifying and validating data collected remotely?

- **Mehari:** We instruct our enumerators to send us the data in ODK or another data collection program so that we can check the data for consistency, completeness, and validity, and compare it with previous data if available. This allows us to provide real-time feedback to address any concerns. Our supervisors also follow up with enumerators to check that the right person was interviewed in addition to making back-check calls to some households to administer selected questions for the purpose of data quality verification.
- **Amina:** The content and operations of the survey can really affect the validity of the data, so we pre-test the survey to identify and address problems. We do partial back-checks (since it is difficult to get someone to fully do another survey) and that helps us to determine data quality. Back-checks mean we have someone other than the original interviewer (such as a supervisor) call the respondent back and ask a subset of questions. These responses are compared to the answers received on the original survey as a way to assess quality of survey results.
- **Arno:** We used pre-validation (field quality control checklists, purposive sampling, triangulation in the sampling design) and post-validation (disaggregated and compared by geography, demographic characteristics, and stakeholder type). We also use participatory interpretation with program teams who work in, and often come from, a certain implementation area. We have sufficient trust in the remote context monitoring data to take decisions confidently, and address "odd" data points with qualitative methods as well.

### What methods should be used for triangulating data collected remotely?

- **Arno:** For self-reported information, like uptake of hygiene practices, key informant interviews with health extension workers can provide triangulation and clarification. We also use multi-method and qualitative interviews for methodological triangulation. That being said, some of the constructs we monitor qualitatively are interpreted very differently from one respondent to another. For instance, social distancing is applied in most communities according to key informants, but the exact distance deemed appropriate varies from one informant to another. We also found that local development committees assess community perceptions of local authorities more negatively than religious leaders, but do not see themselves as local authorities, contrary to religious leaders. We have not yet been able to crack this nut of triangulating cultural meaning interpretations, but we try to leverage participatory interpretation with program teams who are from the areas we monitor.
- **Amina:** One of the methods we use at i-APS is to try to get multiple respondents from a particular area to compare the data. If we are doing phone survey with a small population in which we might run into some issues around representation, we also try to triangulate the data based on source and method.
- **Mehari:** Supervisors make a second call to check that the selected households were actually interviewed and to ask a few more questions to identify any inconsistencies in the responses. We also look at the data for any major outliers and give real-time feedback to the data collector so that they can inquire more about it.

### Can qualitative questions be reliably integrated in phone surveys?

- **Arno:** We use multi-method key informant interviews for context monitoring, including qualitative methods. We had mixed results. If we can count on pre-established trust relationships, we can still get some data of acceptable quality, even though the personal interaction is missing and it is harder to establish validity on the phone.

### Will incentivized participation lead to respondent bias? What compensation is recommended?

- **Mehari:** We have never given incentives in previous surveys. Due to the inconveniences involved in phone interviews (e.g. some people have to relocate to a place with a good network), we discussed with partners and decided to give a small incentive in the form of airtime as a gesture of gratitude for their time and to encourage them to remain in the panel. We believe this contributed to the high response rate.
- **Amina:** There has been quite a bit of research that has shown nominal incentives (one or two dollars depending on the country and context) is not sufficient to create a bias.

## ABOUT IDEAL

Implementer-Led Design, Evidence, Analysis and Learning (IDEAL), funded by the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), works to support the United States Government's goal of improving food and nutrition security among the world's most vulnerable households and communities. IDEAL consists of a consortium of four partner organizations (Save the Children, the Kaizen Company, Mercy Corps, and TANGO International).

Website: www.fsnnetwork.org/IDEAL | Email: info@fsnnetwork.org | Twitter: @FSNNetwork

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