Summary Notes

REAL Research Roundtable: Insights into Implementing Recurrent Monitoring Surveys in USAID-funded Activities
February 24, 2021

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Recurrent Monitoring Surveys (RMS) have the ability to collect near to real-time data on resilience dynamics as they are unfolding, which helps teams understand how project participants are coping and responding in the face of these disturbances.
- RMS rounds occur around shocks and stresses, follow households over time, focus on how individuals/households respond to a shock, and are triggered when a pre-specified threshold is reached.
- RMS data gives program teams the necessary information to make adjustments in program implementation and facilitates internal learning.
- The frequency of RMS rounds depends on the type of shocks and the context.

CASE STUDY 1: IMPLEMENTING AN RMS IN THE RESILIENCE IN THE SAHEL ENHANCED (RISE) INITIATIVE IN NIGER AND BURKINA FASO

I. Presentation: Case Study 1

Tim Frankenberger, President of TANGO International, presented the first RMS case study: Implementing an RMS in the Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced (RISE) initiative in Niger and Burkina Faso. RMS in the RISE initiative demonstrated that populations experienced several different shocks over time. These findings helped better understand the local context and catch early warning signs of conflict and a rise in violent extremism.

- *Main goal of RISE initiative:* Increase resilience among chronically vulnerable populations in agro-pastoral and marginal agriculture livelihoods zones of the Sahel region.

- *Data collection* for the RMS included quantitative (surveying 828 households) and qualitative (focus group discussions, key informant interviews) methods.

- *Findings:* Shock exposure and conflict progressively increased over time.
    - Shocks included drought, excessive rain, lack of rain at critical times, and high winds leading to crop lodging (bending over of the stems of grain crops, which can make harvest difficult and dramatically reduce yield).
    - There was an increase in violent extremism by the third round of RMS, leading to large-scale displacement.
    - Ultimately, findings suggest that RISE interventions had positive effects on these populations (and reduced the negative impact of shocks).

- *Lessons learned:*
    - Localized information is critical to determining the need to set up an RMS. National-level data may not be nuanced enough.

- A good early warning indicator of displacement was an increase in household size.
- Trigger RMS should be budgeted for in the program-frequency of surveys.
- Management challenges include: following displaced HHs over time, access to HHs during COVID-19, and program staff turnover.

II. Question/Answer Session: Case Study 1

- *What are the pros and cons of more frequent monitoring compared to longer intervals?*
  - **Pro:** Collecting data every two months allowed evaluators to see that people were dealing with different shocks, which may not have been captured with a single, annual survey.
  - **Con:** More frequent monitoring, however, is not always better. Initially, monthly monitoring was tested, but deemed to be too frequent and a burden on everyone (evaluators, data collectors, and respondents).
  - **Tips:** RMS can be embedded into normal monitoring, depending on context. In most contexts, monitoring twice a year would be enough.
    - The type of shock matters
      - For sudden onset shocks, a higher frequency may be better.
      - For long-onset shocks, twice a year should be enough.
    - A "lighter touch" RMS could be adapted to include a smaller number of key informant interviews.

- *How fast can RMS information be made available to inform adaptive management decisions and effective responses to shocks?*
  - There are several decisions to make based on this difference: design of subsequent program(s), adaptive management, prioritization of indicators to focus on, etc.
  - **Tips:** The speed at which a team can gather information depends on how the RMS is set up.
    - In an RMS that is part of an impact evaluation for a larger program, the ability to make data available more quickly can be hindered due to a larger scope, number of agreements, etc.
    - Data collection within a smaller project is quicker and access is faster.

- *Question for program teams: How willing is a team to take information and work with it to adapt programming?*
  - Highly adaptive teams with points for reflection can automate data intake and use information more quickly.
  - In reality, a lot of information goes to waste unless there is clarity on the decisions to be made based on data.

- *How can RMS evaluators manage participant fatigue and displacement?*
  - **Strategy 1:** Do not carry out both key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) during every round in order to reduce the burden of qualitative data collection and analysis.
  - **Strategy 2:** Oversample in the beginning to take into account losing respondents. If you lose too many, comparisons become difficult to make.
  - **Strategy 3:** Establish pre-existing relationships.
  - **Strategy 4:** Consider including incentives.
  - **Strategy 5:** Be conscious of the fact that some people want to share thoughts, while others do not. Check in with staff members on the ground.

CASE STUDY 2: EMBEDDING RMS INTO THE SOUTH KIVU FOOD SECURITY PROJECT'S (FSPS) SEASONAL SURVEYS

I.   Presentation: Case Study 2

Arno Bratz, Mercy Corps Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL) Director for Apolou, presented the second RMS case study: Embedding RMS into the South Kivu Food Security Project's Seasonal Surveys. Integrating RMS into the project's MEL system helped the project team adapt to seasonal stresses and shocks, which in turn contributed to an increase in agricultural production and sales in the FSP Intervention Zone.

- *Goal of the South Kivu FSP*: to improve food and nutrition security and economic wellbeing of 210,000 vulnerable households in South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).
- *Methods:* This project utilized both seasonal and shock-triggered RMS.
  - Seasonal: half-yearly, mixed methods (survey heavy), focus on agricultural shocks and stresses.
  - Shock-triggered: monthly, mixed methods (KII heavy), focused on COVID-19 shocks.
- *Steps for integrating RMS* in MEL systems (FIAT-style):
  - **F**rame anticipated changes
  - **I**dentify information gaps
  - **A**dapt MEL strategies
  - **T**ool and retool
  - Then: Analyze, learn, adapt
- The *shock profile* in the FSP intervention zone included pests and plant disease, soil degradation, multiple taxation, crop thefts, land conflict, and waterborne disease.
  - See [REAL Guidance Note 2: Measuring Shocks and Stresses](#).
- *Information gaps identified:* untapped potential to improve resilient agriculture interventions (low adoption rate, low effectiveness of trainings, and a lack of information on the monetary impact of shocks).
- *Embedded or stand-alone RMS:* a trade-off between cost and counterfactuals.
  - Option 1: RMS embedded into annual surveys
  - Option 2: standalone or Baseline/Final Evaluation-embedded RMS
- *Findings:* 41.5% of agricultural production value was lost; 24% was preventable.
  - Intervention design and adaptations contributed to increased production and sales.
- *Lessons learned* on embedding RMS into MEL systems:
  - RMS in this case study was a good investment, since teams were able to adapt intervention approaches based on data.

II.   Question/Answer Session: Case Study 2

- *How to determine the sampling size and sampling frame of a RMS?*
  - **Sample size:** Determined using power calculations based on indicators such as food insecurity, dietary diversity, food quantity, agricultural production, and sales.
  - **Sampling frame:** For the seasonal RMS, the sampling frame consisted of the core group of farmers from the program, with rolling registration changes taken into account.
    - The more replacement, the less representative findings are in the coming year.
    - For the COVID-19 RMS, evaluators chose a village clustering approach to take into account regional differences.

- ▪ The more disaggregation, the less comparable data is. This should be taken into account beforehand.
- *How to balance the feasibility of collecting data, analysis, use, and frequency? How to determine if it's worth it?*
  - o **There is no one answer.** Teams have to make decisions based on resources, capacity of staff, and the objective of data collection.
  - o **Goal:** lower the cost, but increase the frequency.
    - ▪ One solution to reach this goal is to embed an enumerator in a village, instead of bringing in a big survey team every couple months. This can also help keep the pulse of a dynamic situation.
    - ▪ Too long of an interval between data collection periods will miss some of the shocks in a dynamic risk environment. In this context, surveys should be conducted more often.
  - o **RMS can help prioritize interventions.**
    - ▪ Although the value of research and monitoring is unknown, many RFSAs (resilience food security activities) (previously called DFSAs) have difficulties prioritizing interventions, which RMS can inform.
    - ▪ Start with the hypothesis that more data will improve implementation.
    - ▪ Information can be used very effectively in adaptive management.
- *How long does it take to do qualitative and quantitative analyses?*
  - o **Mixed methods are necessary.** Qualitative data captures information that is hard to capture in a survey. Particularly around conflict dynamics. It's important to be realistic about how quickly the team can turn around information for decision making. This depends on how fast an analysis is needed and on resources.
    - ▪ The best researchers are often needed on the qualitative side to pick up on nuances of aspiration and agency, for example.
  - o **Biggest question:** What type of mixed methods do you want to do?
    - ▪ If information is needed quickly, do KIIs, leaving a couple questions open.
    - ▪ For example, the FSP RMS team prioritized their data collection by focusing on qualitative information and analysis on COVID-19 as soon as possible.
  - o Many projects and organizations unfortunately under-budget and under-plan for qualitative methods. To get an idea of consensus and dissent, time must be invested in qualitative analysis.
    - ▪ There are no real shortcuts so far (no good artificial intelligence for qualitative analysis yet).
    - ▪ Looking for deeper tendencies requires a longer time frame: 2-week turnaround for qualitative analysis, 2-hour turnaround for quantitative analysis.

KEY LINKS

- Resilience Measurement Practical Guidance Note Series 6: Recurrent Monitoring Surveys
- Resilience Measurement Practical Guidance Note Series 6: Recurrent Monitoring Surveys- French
- Insights into Implementing Recurrent Monitoring Surveys in USAID-funded Activities Webinar Presentation- English
- Webinar Recording- English
- REAL Guidance Note Series
- Mobile Phone & Remote Tool Considerations for M&E in a COVID-19 Environment (June 10, 2020) webinar, presentation slides, blog, and FAQ sheet
- COVID-19 Adaptive Management Showcase poster presentation

ABOUT REAL

The REAL Award is a consortium-led effort funded by the USAID Center for Resilience. It was established to respond to the growing demand among USAID missions, host governments, implementing organizations, and other key stakeholders for rigorous yet practical monitoring, evaluation, strategic analysis, and capacity building support related to resilience. REAL consists of a consortium of Save the Children, Food for the Hungry, Mercy Corps, and TANGO International.

Website: www.fsnnetwork.org/REAL | Email: real@savechildren.org | Twitter: @REAL_Award

DISCLAIMER

This document is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of the Resilience, Evaluation and Learning (REAL) Award and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.