Calling for Data in the Time of COVID-19

Practical tips and tricks for monitoring via phone and in low- to no-connectivity environments during COVID-19

By Chris Riggs, IDEAL

Connectivity has evolved rapidly in the last 20 years. I remember being one of the first kids in my high school to receive a cellphone when I was 16 in 2006. Now, connectivity has never been higher and access to cellphones in some of the most remote areas of the world is not uncommon. Village elders or chiefs will often have access to a cell phone even if no one else does. To prevent spread of the coronavirus, monitoring and evaluation staff are looking to cellphones as a key tool for collecting data that otherwise would have been collected in-person. But how can we continue monitoring in areas of the world that are still without any cellphone service? As Amina Ferati, President of i-APS, is keen to point out during a recent webinar about [mobile phone and remote tool considerations for M&E during COVID-19](#), monitoring and

> *"Life existed before phones and there are options to consider when looking at these limited resource settings"*
> *Amina Ferati*
> *President i-APS*

evaluation in challenging, no-connectivity contexts is not new. By combining modern conveniences, practical guidance on paper surveys, and adherence to COVID-19 guidelines, enumerators can adapt and be equally effective in their data collection.

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PREPARATION IS KEY

Whether using phone- or paper-based surveys, thorough preparation is critical for success. In Ethiopia, Kimetrica and TANGO International obtained a 98.1 percent response rate, which is higher than the previous three RMS rounds done face-to–face. Mehari Belachew, Head of Survey Service at Kimetrica, explained: "We put a lot of energy, a lot of time into making all the necessary preparations." From exploring availability of telephone networks and electricity for charging the phones to the status of the telephone apparatus and making sure there is an assigned focal person within each of the sample clusters who can help set up appointments and support other on-the-ground efforts. Each preparatory step, however, was made more complicated by the introduction of COVID-19.

USE SCENARIO PLANNING AND A MIX OF TOOLS

In Yemen, where connectivity is low or non-existent, i-APS had data collectors use Kobo ToolBox and stored the data offline while they conducted interviews, taking COVID-19 precautions including distancing of at least 2 meters, personal protective equipment, and proper sanitation. If using Kobo ToolBox or another smartphone-based software is not possible, there are ways to use paper surveys and still ensure proper COVID-19 precautions are followed. Surveys are filled out by one focal point person and are not handed to

anyone else. When reaching an area with connectivity, a photo of the data is uploaded and digitized. I-APS has [developed a toolkit](#) to help think through different scenarios based on limited resource settings with and without COVID-19.

Adapting complex M&E systems in rapidly evolving situations is a challenge. Arno Bratz, MEL manager for Mercy Corps, described how the [FIAT approach](#) can help projects adapt and streamline monitoring strategies to focus on the most critical data and adjust/develop collection tools to work in a COVID-19 environment. This was done successfully in South Kivu, DRC, where the USAID-funded *Food Security Project* had to adapt to constantly changing supply chain regulations and low COVID testing capacity.

Frame Anticipated Changes
Identify Information Gaps
Adapt Monitoring Strategies
Tool and Retool
Analyze, Learn, Adapt

KNOWLEDGE SHARING WILL HELP US SUCCEED

Whether working in Yemen, Ethiopia, or DRC, M&E practitioners continue to innovate and share their experiences, learnings, and practices with each other. Utilizing these networks of colleagues is one of the easiest and most efficient ways to increase knowledge generation and capture in programming. Collaboration and peer-to-peer learning can help us keep working to improve food security among the world's most vulnerable communities, even in the face of a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

USEFUL LINKS

- [Webinar Recording](#)
- [Presentation Slides](#)
- [i-APS Guide on Monitoring, Evaluation and Research in Limited Resource Settings in the COVID-19 Context](#)
- [i-APS Guide on Third-Party Monitoring in the COVID-19 Context](#)
- [i-APS Results of Global Survey of Impact of COVID-19 on Monitoring and Evaluation](#)
- Mercy Corps Phone Interview Checklists in [English](#) and [French](#)