The emergence of COVID-19 affected all aspects of social life. Strict prevention measures forced humanitarian organizations to reorganize their day-to-day activities in order to respect their commitments, not least in the area of monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Drawing on experiences in the field, this article explores how M&E practices turned to agility and innovation to maintain minimum standards of quality and accountability while adapting to COVID-19 in areas already experiencing fragility.
Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of social life: health, education, politics, the economy, development, sector policies, and more. To prevent the worst, various governments, with the support of the World Health Organization, introduced so-called barrier measures to slow the spread of the virus. These barriers force individuals and organizations that wished to respect their commitments to reorganize their day-to-day activities. The implementation of humanitarian programs and projects in general and their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) component in particular were not exempt from the phenomenon. At the same time, it is important to note that implementing, monitoring, and evaluating projects during emergencies is nothing new. Time and time again, crises around the world have required a humanitarian intervention to save lives in environments fraught with insecurity and emergencies. This state of affairs has prompted nongovernmental organizations and United Nations specialized agencies to develop guides and manuals for monitoring and evaluating projects during emergencies. Their objective is to “adapt approaches, attitudes, methods, techniques, and tools to the emergency and humanitarian crisis context. This involves taking into account specificities related to context, pace, timeframe, beneficiaries, stakeholders, needs, access, security, and volume—both financial and operational” (Hallé, Mareschal, 2018: 10). The COVID-19 pandemic added a new level of complexity to the implementation of projects and programs in these situations, particularly as regards project M&E.

This article draws on experiences from the field to show how M&E practices have had to demonstrate agility and innovation in adapting to the conditions created by the pandemic in order to uphold minimum standards of quality and accountability, frequently in areas already in the grip of a security crisis (sometimes more than one). The authors used an interview guide to remotely collect primary data on M&E officers’ experiences conducting M&E during the pandemic. The officers gave the authors their informed consent to be cited in this article. Data was also gathered from direct participant observation of officers conducting their daily activities. Secondary data was drawn from the literature. A content analysis produced the coherent set of findings reported here.

Key Messages

- The emergence of COVID-19 has underscored the need for agility and a spirit of innovation within M&E teams.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed an additional benefit of secondary data: namely, that secondary data need not be collected directly, and is therefore less risky for M&E teams.
- Despite the constraints, M&E must not compromise its standards for quality and accountability even as it adapts to new and complex ecosystems.
This article begins by presenting M&E practices common in emergencies. It then analyzes the constraints caused by the COVID-19 crisis. The article concludes by presenting the adaptation strategies developed by actors in the field and the opportunities that emerged.

Common M&E practices during emergencies

Emergency interventions can be defined as interventions where the immediate needs of communities affected by armed conflict or a natural disaster must be met very quickly and in an efficient and appropriate manner. In situations like these, M&E practices must be responsive and dynamic. “Research and M&E activities are possible during any stage of a crisis, but different data collection approaches may be appropriate at different phases of a conflict.” (UN Women, 2020). To avoid the M&E system falling out of step with project activities, it is important that M&E take the events that triggered the emergency into account. Among other things, the M&E system must respect the timeframe in which actions can take place. This timeframe tends to be short: in particular, there is often little time for assessing the needs and the context. A good assessment of the needs and the context makes it possible to ensure that the project is sensitive to the conflict and does not produce negative effects or effects that might exacerbate beneficiaries’ vulnerability. The assessment must recognize the precariousness of the situation and avoid burdening beneficiaries with collecting a large volume of data or collecting data at a rapid rate. Furthermore, the M&E system must be both flexible and agile, because emergencies require interventions that cross several sectors: this multiplies needs and the number of actors involved. All this takes place in an environment in which access is difficult, movement is restricted, and safety is a concern. Very often, M&E officers set up a data collection system—a system to manage complaints and gather information from beneficiaries—that considers it probable that former systems have collapsed, making them of limited use or absent altogether.

Many organizations operating in these contexts have developed guidelines and manuals tailored to emergencies. Catholic Relief Services (CRS), for example, has developed three standards for M&E in emergencies: “(i) Early monitoring systems are simple, use-oriented and flexible to accommodate change in context and activities; (ii) monitor the relevance, effectiveness, and quality of the response to increase accountability to the people we serve; and (iii) create a formal M&E system for the overall response as soon as the situation stabilizes” (Morel, Hagens, 2012: 5).

Terre des hommes, a nongovernmental organization, has diagrammed the main characteristics of monitoring in the context of emergencies and humanitarian crises (Figure 1). Terre des hommes also demonstrates how monitoring evolves over the course of a crisis (Figure 2).

The elements in Figures 1 and 2 are purely illustrative, since they may vary by organization or context. Nonetheless, the figures show that M&E has different features during a crisis than during normal times. In other words, M&E officers adapt to their operating environment and to constraints in the field.

Covid-19 and M&E constraints during a crisis

The irrefutable need to limit the spread of COVID-19 and prevent further contagion has prompted various organizations to adopt measures that take epidemiological data into account and integrate recommendations by the World Health Organization. In essence, experts advised and continue to advise limiting the size of groups and reducing traditional
physical contact: that is to say, they advise physical distancing. This has translated into such barrier measures as wearing a mask, washing one’s hands regularly with soap and running water, using hydroalcoholic gel, coughing or sneezing in the crook of one’s elbow, etc. Organizations have adopted institutional measures likewise: for example, closing buildings, mandating work-from-home, reducing staff’s working days, rotating work, and limiting activities—not just on site/in the office, but also in the field. Given the current health crisis, all these measures are constraints that seem necessary to accept, all the more so in areas that call for humanitarian aid. This is no less true when it comes to monitoring and evaluating projects. The next section of this paper identifies several constraints to M&E. The list of constraints is far from exhaustive.

**Figure 1: The Principal Features of Monitoring in Emergencies and Crises (Hallé, Mareschal, 2018: 83)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Simple and efficient</th>
<th>Launched during strategic planning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoid placing a heavy burden on staff and detracting from the response itself, enable decision-making and be use-oriented. To do so, focus on regular and timely monitoring and rapid evaluations.</td>
<td>Strategic planning shapes the monitoring system.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Timely</th>
<th>Dynamic</th>
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<tr>
<td>It helps the team to be responsive to the changing context and evolving needs.</td>
<td>It is adapted to the crisis level and response phase: monitoring in emergencies first focuses on the inputs, activities, outputs, processes and context. It then considers outcomes and impact.</td>
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<th>Inclusive and participative</th>
<th>Ethics-oriented</th>
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<tr>
<td>Internal cooperation (M&amp;E, operations support teams) and work with external stakeholders helps give voice to the affected population. Participation ensures monitoring is well accepted and credible. This helps build ownership. Take into account key principles: gender, equity and equality.</td>
<td>It is informed by &quot;do no harm&quot;, necessity and protection principles; ensures a high level of data protection and is sensitive to beneficiary fatigue.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Quality-oriented</th>
<th>A critical part of RBM</th>
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<tr>
<td>Choose the most appropriate methods to ensure data quality management. Be open to challenging assumptions.</td>
<td>It forms a basis for clear and accurate appreciation, measurement and communication of the results achieved by an intervention.</td>
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</table>
**Constraints to the quality of project data**

Because of how COVID-19 is transmitted, the pandemic exposes the quality of project data to certain risks. First, to ensure that project data is of good quality and matches the data recorded on computer servers, M&E officers often verify the data on paper. But paper tends to be handled by several people. Second, in the context of mobile data collection—collecting data on smartphones and tablets—M&E officers are regularly called upon to handle the mobile devices used to collect project data digitally. For example, data collection agents might ask officers to configure the devices, to manipulate them to resolve technical problems, or to check surveys before their release. Given the prevention measures recommended for COVID-19, should M&E officers systematically disinfect their hands after handling paper and the mobile devices used to collect and validate data?

**The reduction or suspension of M&E field activities**

COVID-19 caused many organizations to reduce their field activities or suspend them altogether. Both decisions make it difficult to conduct field surveys, supervision missions, evaluation missions, etc. In a technical note,

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**Figure 2**: How Monitoring Evolves over the Course of an Emergency or Humanitarian Crisis (Hallé, Mareschal, 2018: 83)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information needs</th>
<th>Evaluations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Common monitoring and sampling methods</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rapid response</strong></td>
<td><strong>Situation stabilises</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Limited staff, little time, many things to do</td>
<td>• More staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Priority focus on response</td>
<td>• Less pressure for immediate response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Changing context</td>
<td></td>
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**Changing emerging context**

Secondary review, informal discussions with a few respondents or more structured interviews, field observations

**All goods and services delivered (activity, process)**

Actual counts documented in activity records

**Actual use of inputs by project participants/community feedback on early response (short-term outcome)**

Observation, pre-post questionnaires, ranking exercises, FGD, closed-ended surveys using purposeful or very small random samples

**More in-depth outcome monitoring, comparing results between sub-groups, probing with “how” and “why” questions**

Observation, FGD, purposeful sampling, closed-ended surveys (small random sampling)

**Outcome – Impact**

Observation, FGD (purposeful sampling) and household surveys (random sampling)
the International Labor Organization (ILO) noted that "temporary suspensions of interviewing are widespread due to COVID-19 restrictions. Their duration will be variable and quite often unknown. They can refer to the entire sample or only part of the sample" (ILO, 2020: 14). For example, at the RESILAC Project for inclusive economic and social recovery around Lake Chad, Jean Nka'a Ela Ekouet, the manager of monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning for the RESILAC Consortium in Maroua (Agence de développement française Cameroon), noted that the project's studies were postponed and the medium-term evaluation did not take place.

The lack of timely data

Fewer field trips do not only make it difficult to obtain data on time: they also make it difficult to obtain data of good quality. Without field trips, M&E teams can no longer undergo regular training. A lack of training impacts several aspects of project data, namely its accuracy, its reliability, its precision, its completeness, and its timeliness. In this regard, Cyrielle Effa, officer in charge of monitoring, evaluation, and quality improvement at ACAFEM-Yaoundé, stressed that the main difficulty related to COVID-19 was the suspension of physical contact with teams on the ground. This delayed the provision and collection of data and made it impossible to begin the project with reliable data (inconsistencies, mistakes in the information recorded on forms and in registries).

Fewer in-person meetings and fewer training sessions

Team capacity-building activities were also impacted as restrictions and barrier measures led trainings to be suspended or the format of trainings to be reviewed. For example, the M&E manager of the RESILAC Consortium in Maroua mentioned that the monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning team was not trained in the project tools (BDD, Kobo software) in person but online. As in other projects, the Consortium's online capacity-building activities and virtual meetings took precedence over face-to-face training.

The effect of a poor internet connection on online activities

As noted earlier, the number of online activities—meetings, training, conferences, and webinars—increased to limit the risk of contagion. But poor internet connections made it difficult to conduct these activities smoothly. Often, interruptions to the internet signal made it impossible for participants to take part in an activity from beginning to end. One commentator noted that a poor internet connection when using Skype meant that coordination meetings were less satisfactory, and follow-up on activities and recommendations suffered as a result.

As the pandemic has continued, barrier measures have remained in place. And M&E officers and their organizations have had to adapt.

Adaptation strategies and opportunities

To continue to monitor their projects’ progress and to assess the achievement of results, M&E officers have had to adapt existing strategies and develop new ones. Notwithstanding the constraints, however, the health crisis has also created opportunities.

A. Adaptation strategies

The concept of adaptation can be interpreted different ways. In one, adaptation refers to the process in which an entity’s new living conditions transform the entity and allow it to respond more effectively to those new conditions (Ricqlès, 2021). The new reality imposed by COVID-19 has required project M&E practices to adapt in this way. Several strategies have emerged as a result.
REMOTE WORK

Like experts in other industries, M&E officers have switched to telecommuting. Their use of tools—the telephone, Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp, and Teams—has increased dramatically. Working groups have been set up for monitoring activities (mainly on WhatsApp), for evaluation meetings (on Skype, Zoom, and Teams), and to train people online (on Zoom, Teams, and Skype).

EVALUATIONS CONDUCTED BY LOCAL CONSULTANTS

To carry out certain evaluations while limiting travel, organizations have opted to recruit local consultants instead of international ones.

COLLECTING DATA REMOTELY USING INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY (ICT)

Collecting data online instead of in situ is a common practice that pandemic-related restrictions have caused to become more frequent still. To collect data online, M&E officers have made greater use of tools like KoBoCollect, Google Form, and Microsoft Form. By way of illustration, the authors of this article collected data on Google Forms and KoBoCollect for three projects related to COVID-19. It is generally as simple as using email, WhatsApp, or Facebook to send a link to a survey to the target population, upon the receipt of which respondents can use a smartphone, a tablet, or a computer to submit their response. This practice conforms fully to the physical distancing measures recommended to limit the spread of COVID-19. Security risks in areas experiencing fragility have caused programs operating in red zones to collect data remotely as well.

AN INCREASE IN RAPID EVALUATIONS

Rapid evaluations have become more common in areas that are experiencing security risks. UN Women explains why: “In the event of an extreme emergency, the most crucial post-conflict services for the community are the immediate life-saving assistance services. Research activities of a general nature are not necessarily the most suitable; on the other hand, it is possible to carry out rapid assessments and collect routine M&E data, with a focus on achievements and data provided by services” (UN Women, 2019).

CONDUCTING EVALUATIONS REMOTELY

Again, to limit the movement of people, and in the absence of recruiting local consultants, many assessments have been carried out remotely. For example, in October 2020, the authors took part in an evaluation, NUPAS Plus, as part of a program in Cameroon financed by USAID with funds from the President’s Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR). The evaluation team was composed of national and international consultants. SustainAbility Solutions Africa, the firm responsible for the assessment, is based in South Africa and the principal consultants did not travel to Cameroon.

The methodology for the assessment consisted mainly of interviews (a series of questions and answers administered with a dedicated assessment tool) and the verification of documents and evidence. For this purpose, the evaluation team created a Google Drive account to transfer documents into folders organized.
B. Opportunities

Where M&E is concerned, COVID-19 created numerous obstacles. But it also created opportunities.

Capacity-building

M&E officers were able to build their capacity to monitor and evaluate projects remotely. They did this not only by practicing, but also with online training such as the webinar entitled “Remote Program Monitoring with CommCare” that Dimagi organized on 21 April 2020. M&E officers also built expertise in facilitating meetings virtually. The pandemic disrupted usual practices, and the increase in the number of follow-up meetings online improved officers’ ability to conduct online meetings and to use special applications. The crisis also made it urgent that M&E officers improve and adapt their practices, knowledge, tools, and procedures for producing high-quality data. That is why training modules emerged with the aim of providing project managers in general and M&E officers in particular with the rudiments and tools they needed to adapt to the context imposed by COVID-19 while continuing to ensure that ongoing programs were implemented satisfactorily.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this article was to evaluate M&E practices in the context of a health and security crisis. To do this, the authors analyzed the constraints, adaptation strategies, and opportunities that have manifested in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings show that M&E faced many constraints: difficulties in verifying the quality of the data; the limitation and suspension of field visits; failures to receive data on time; fewer face-to-face training and meetings; poor internet connections that made it difficult to carry out activities and collect data remotely. Although some of the constraints have lessened of late, the pandemic has persisted and many restrictions remain. As a consequence, M&E officers and their organizations have had to adapt and develop strategies such as teleworking, conducting assessments with local consultants, collecting data remotely with ICT, conducting more rapid evaluations, and conducting more evaluations from a distance. At the same time, a few opportunities have emerged, notably a better capacity to monitor projects remotely and facilitate meetings online. Notwithstanding, some organizations report that the pandemic significantly undermined projects’ performance and result. Franck Samkomble, an M&E officer at Horizons Femmes, noted that the company recorded its weakest performance of the fiscal year in March, April, and May 2020.
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