M&E: Challenges and Lessons from Syria

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We spoke to her about lessons learnt conducting Monitoring and Evaluation in challenging contexts, with a particular focus on one of the most complex conflicts of our time – Syria.

For more information on our Syria portfolio, please contact:

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What were the key lessons learnt from your past experiences working in Monitoring & Evaluation in conflict-affected countries?

KR: The most important lesson I have taken away is the crucial importance of filling key positions on your team with national staff – by which I mean people from the countries we are working in – including field officers, coordinators and managers. It is vital not to merely join forces with national partners exclusively for the purpose of data collection, but to actually hire, directly manage, and build the capacity of national staff. They provide a project with invaluable access to programme sites and a more in-depth understanding of the context. Translating their knowledge into actionable recommendations facilitates the design and implementation of more contextually relevant, conflict-sensitive and therefore ultimately more sustainable and successful programming. Trusted expert staff, who know the nuances of the context should be the foundation of every good programme. Without them, you are more likely to programme and/or monitor blindly, wasting limited human and financial resources.

What were the key technical problems you encountered in these contexts?

KR: It is a recurring issue across conflict-affected countries that it is extremely challenging and at times, next to impossible to establish a rigorous baseline from which to gather information. This has been particularly the case Syria. For example, we based one of our M&E programmes on an initial sample of eight communities from which to develop in-depth case studies on the outcomes and impact of the programme. At present, only three of them are still viable either due to changes in the conflict or programme suspension. It is important to apply a high degree of flexibility and to come up with creative solutions to these types of technical challenges while still providing rigorous and reliable information.

What information do donors and implementers need to identify and assess problems in their programmes?

KR: It really depends on what type of information they require based on what gaps may exist in their knowledge. For example, if they are concerned about how a programme is being managed, process monitoring can identify areas for improvement. If there are either (i) concerns about the reliability of programme reporting or (ii) requirements for an additional layer of validation, then verification of partner reporting can provide that type of information. Monitoring of higher level outcome and impact indicators can help identify whether or not the programme is on a trajectory to achieve its objectives. If it isn't, you can identify the issues and offer recommendations on how to solve them. For serious concerns over finances, forensic accounting or auditing can provide reliable information about how money was spent.

What is important to remember is that gathering the most relevant information for donors and implementers is only half the story. Whether and how this evidence is used is the other half. With internal M&E and independent monitors and evaluators, donors can end up with a lot of information about programming at their disposal. The data coming out of all of the monitoring and evaluating must first be absorbed by the donors and implementing partners and then fed back into programme design and implementation. Otherwise, valuable resources are wasted, as are opportunities to identify best practice from programmes that are performing well or help improve the effectiveness of those that might be struggling.

What are the key lessons from your work doing third party monitoring in Syria?

KR: Well, there are a number of lessons I've taken from Syria, most of them reinforcing those from my previous experience. The conflict in Syria is extremely complex and very much localised, so the armed groups and community dynamics vary considerably—often from one community to another. The conflict also changes rapidly, with ground being lost and gained by one group or another frequently.

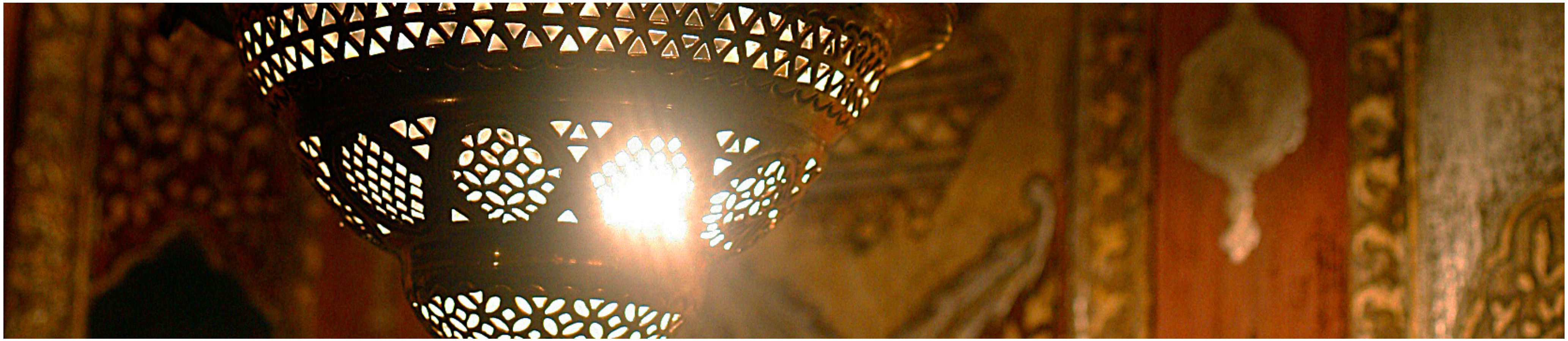
Firstly, successful implementation and/or monitoring in this constantly evolving environment requires a clear understanding of the local context. If you don't have that, then programming is going to be insufficiently nuanced and inadequately tailored. This means you won't understand the relevance of the data and information you're collecting to its full extent and, in turn, won't be able to provide accurate assessments or recommendations. So, I go back to my earlier point on national staff. Particularly for longer-term monitoring projects like the one I am currently leading, investment in growing a team is of the essence in providing consistently reliable and contextually relevant information which we then transform into high-quality services to our client. Our recruitment strategy focused primarily on identifying staff who are from the areas in which they'll be working, and less on their employment history. This is absolutely essential, as in the Syrian context, building the trust you need with the interviewees, focus group or survey participants is difficult, if not next to impossible if the field officer comes from another part of the country. As a result, you won't get the depth of information or nuance required. One of the best examples I can provide is one of the field officers who has been with us for the life of the project—over one year now. When we hired him, he was young and had no real work experience. But he was well connected in the communities where he would be monitoring and, more importantly, he was highly motivated to learn. Over the past year, he has become one of our best and most proactive field officers. Without his grounding in the local community, we would not have had the level of access nor the quality of information he provides each monitoring cycle. He's now training his network in Syria on

M&E techniques, so it's incredibly rewarding to see the positive impact that working closely with one person can have on a wider community level.

An important point to make here about our teaming approach is the need to guard against your staff members' bias. Everyone has a perspective, particularly in a charged context like Syria. We have to be very careful that our biases do not enter into our data collection and reporting —that our information remains objective and neutral. We address this risk through understanding the background and potential bias of our staff. Then we conduct regular training with them on research techniques and ethics, helping them identify their own biases as they occur. We also employ a multi-layered quality assurance system, where various staff members check the data, identifying any areas where personal opinions may be surfacing.

Secondly, Syria has also reinforced for me the need for flexible programming. As a rule, M&E tends to be very rigid and systematic—and this is generally what you expect and require in M&E! However in a context like Syria where realities can change within hours, a rigid log frame approach is not necessarily a good fit. What might work better in such a fluid environment is an approach that is flexible, solution-oriented and allows for regular review and adaptation as needed. Having a range of options for what you monitor and how you monitor it allows you to adapt as the environment changes. For example, in-person field visits might not always be an option—what do you do instead? How do you maintain rigour if you have to change course? A programme or parts of a programme could be suspended—how does this impact your monitoring plan? My solution has been to remain focused on the overarching goal of providing my client with an accurate assessment of the outcome and impact of their programme and not being too tied to the activity plan I set out at the beginning of the quarter. Plans will change, indicators might have to be revisited. Working to that overall objective allows us to identify appropriate solutions to challenges as they arise.

Finally, effective and regular communication are key! Communicating



clearly and in a targeted manner with the client around the challenges you are facing is essential in complex contexts like Syria. I communicate with my clients as often as possible—in person, via email, over the phone—whichever way they find most useful. Like this they are aware immediately of any particular challenges arising. I've been fortunate in that our clients are experienced in these types of environments and well aware of the challenges both the programming and our third party monitoring team face. They're flexible when it comes to revisiting workplans due to contextual challenges. I am a big believer in informing them early of difficulties we're facing to facilitate the discussion. Providing them with a range of potential solutions and a recommendation on the best approach makes those conversations easier and more effective.

In the greater scheme of humanitarian and development assistance in conflict, what value do you see in Integrity's approach?

KR: At Integrity we are committed to grounding our programming in the local context and focus on building local capacity across all geographies we work in. This distinct approach provides us with access to a vast and indispensable wealth of knowledge that if utilised correctly can lead to more relevant and sustainable programming. Our national staff's expertise is an invaluable resource that clients and their partners can draw on when considering funding programming in conflict – an understanding that is essential for designing, implementing, and monitoring programming in a sustainable and conflict-sensitive way.

By building national capacity, we also help ensure positive impact is more sustainable in a way that often even goes beyond programme objectives. Experienced staff who can draw on their acquired skills and expertise have the potential to help their communities move on from conflict and have a meaningful and positive impact at both the local and national level. We aim to build a lasting resource that can significantly contribute to the conflict transformation and recovery process.

Integrity's commitment to knowledge sharing further facilitates this process. We work very closely with our clients and their partners to ensure that the lessons we're learning are being fed back into programme implementation, the institutional knowledge of staff, and ultimately the discourse around best practice for programmes in conflict in the sector.