



What is monitoring in humanitarian action?

Describing practice and identifying challenges

Alexandra T. Warner

 ALNAP SCOPING PAPER

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Suggested citation

Warner, A, T. (2017) 'What is monitoring in humanitarian action? Describing practice and identifying challenges'. ALNAP Scoping Paper. London: ALNAP/ODI

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Publication and communications management
by Tim Harcourt-Powell

Design and typesetting by Lucy Peers

Edited by Roo Griffiths, Chloé Sanguinetti
and Renée Goulet

ISBN: 978-1-910454-60-2

ALNAP would like to acknowledge the financial support of USAID in carrying out this initiative.



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Acknowledgements

A special thank you goes to the critical friends of the scoping phase of the research: Lisa Daoud (Solidarités International), Josse Gillijns (IFRC) and Joanna Olsen (CRS). Their comments, insights and assistance throughout the scoping phase were extremely valuable; they helped orient the research and improve the overall quality of the findings so far. Thank you for your time and for having agreed to act as peer reviewers.

Many thanks go to the interviewees who so kindly gave their time to discuss monitoring practice in humanitarian action.

The author would also especially like to thank Jacqueline Flentge (WFP), Hur Hassnain (formerly War Child UK), Mikkel Nedergaard (formerly DRC) and John Lakeman (DRC) for inviting the ALNAP Secretariat to take part in monitoring workshops and trainings. These were very useful to test and further elaborate preliminary findings.

A big thank you goes to the five key proofers of the report. Thank you Jacqueline Flentge (WFP), David Goetghebuer (UNHCR), Hanadi Riyadh (War Child UK), John Mark Udalang (DRC) and Cara Winters (NRC). Your help in ensuring the accuracy of the report but also adding depth and nuance was greatly appreciated.

Appreciation also goes to members of the ALNAP Secretariat. Thank you to Neil Dillon for his support and guidance, to Paul Knox Clarke for his feedback on early drafts, to Tim Harcourt-Powell for entertaining incoherent communication ideas and to Maria Gili for assisting in overall communication.

The author would like to thank the ALNAP Membership for its support during the scoping phase of this research.



List of Acronyms

ACF	Action Contre La Faim (Action Against Hunger)
Adeso	African Development Solutions
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
DME	Design, Monitoring and Evaluation
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
ECB	Emergency Capacity Building
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office
GPPI	Global Public Policy Institute
HQ	Headquarters
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
INGO	International NGO
INTRAC	International NGO Training and Research Centre
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MERL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning
MHA	Monitoring in Humanitarian Action
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NNGO	National Non-Governmental Organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PMEAL	Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning
PMER	Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
UNISDR	United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
VOICE	Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies
WFP	World Food Programme

1 / Introduction

“ Demands on monitoring have grown as each agency aims to better incorporate feedback from affected populations into programming, to measure outcomes as well as outputs, to assess value for money and to remotely monitor work in challenging contexts. ”

Monitoring has long been acknowledged as being an area that is in need of further attention. In 2003, ALNAP’s Annual Review, ‘Humanitarian action: Improving monitoring to enhance accountability and learning’, identified a number of issues with the practice of monitoring, first and foremost a general lack of clarity on the meaning of the term. Since then, despite consistent recognition of the need for improvement, little significant progress has been achieved (ALNAP, 2010, 2012).

At the same time, the amount of organisation- and sector-specific guidance on monitoring has only increased since ALNAP’s original research on this subject. Demands on monitoring have grown as each agency aims to better incorporate feedback from affected populations into programming, to measure outcomes as well as outputs, to assess value for money and to remotely monitor work in challenging contexts. Different organisations have sought to meet these demands in their own, independent, ways. As a result, disagreement and confusion have arisen concerning the activities, types, levels and purposes of monitoring.

Demands on monitoring will only increase in coming years, as a result of system-level discussions and commitments following the World Humanitarian Summit and the signing of the Grand Bargain. This is therefore a good time to take a step back and give consideration to monitoring across the humanitarian system.

It is for this reason that ALNAP has undertaken this descriptive review of the current state of the practice in the humanitarian sector. This Scoping Paper provides an overview of current theory and practice, takes stock of some key challenges faced and identifies key questions on how to improve the quality and use of monitoring information.

2 / Research overview

2.1 Purpose and scope

This Scoping Paper aims to facilitate further investigation by the ALNAP Secretariat and others. It was designed to identify gaps, tensions and blockages that have implications for the quality and use of monitoring information in humanitarian action. The research questions were kept open to make it possible to follow the needs and concerns of field practitioners and to enable the capture of issues affecting the quality and use of monitoring information (more in Concept Note in Annex 1). ALNAP will explore some of the issues further in 2017–2018 through focused research projects or guidance notes. For more on this, see Section 6 on ‘Next steps’ at the end of this paper.

The scope of this paper was defined by three principal lines of enquiry:

1. What is monitoring in humanitarian action?
And who influences its definition?
2. How is monitoring information used?
At a field level, does practice differ from policy?
3. What barriers or gaps negatively influence the quality and use of monitoring data and information?

These questions were intended to allow the research team to generate an overview of monitoring theory and practice, to capture the divergences in definitions and approaches across the ALNAP Membership and to highlight key challenges arising and missing elements in the monitoring systems observed.

The research focused on project-level monitoring, rather than on the programme, strategy or global levels. This distinction is inherently imperfect, given the diversity of types and sizes of humanitarian organisations. Nevertheless, the findings should be understood as applying to the monitoring of humanitarian projects, and not monitoring at higher levels or of inter-organisational monitoring (e.g. Cluster reporting).

Moreover, it should be noted that the Scoping Paper aims to capture the current state of affairs of monitoring in humanitarian action. It is not designed to provide an assessment or evaluation of agencies’ monitoring frameworks. Nor is it designed to capture good practice examples. For this reason, its scope included no evaluative questions.

“ This Scoping Paper was designed to reflect current practice across the ALNAP Membership and to offer a common starting point for discussion. ”

2.2 Design

This Scoping Paper was designed to reflect current practice across the ALNAP Membership and to offer a common starting point for discussion, in the understanding that it would not have been possible to create an exhaustive assessment.

The initial research approach was outlined in a Concept Note (see Annex 1), which was iteratively refined throughout the data collection and analysis phase. Throughout the process, ALNAP worked with three monitoring experts drawn from its Membership who acted as ‘critical friends’ to the exercise.¹ The critical friends helped make sure the research was on the right track by providing advice on methodology, who to speak to and what literature to include.

The methodology was based around four data collection activities:

1. **Literature review** – to generate an overview of the monitoring policies and guidance provided by ALNAP Members to their own staff. This activity informed the design of the interview protocols for Steps 2 and 3.
2. **Key informant interviews** – to address issues around the conduct of monitoring as understood by monitoring experts and advisors at global, regional or country level. The research team used semi-structured interview protocols to allow for the inclusion of new ideas as interviewees brought them up. This was important given the diversity of definitions and approaches taken towards monitoring across ALNAP’s Membership.
3. **Cross-team interviews** – to understand issues arising around monitoring from the perspective of internal users of project-level monitoring information.
4. **Shadowing internal monitoring workshops** – to observe and listen to practitioners’ monitoring concerns as well as to test and further elaborate preliminary findings.

Criteria were put in place to help direct the selection of interviewees and literature. ALNAP worked to ensure coverage of different ALNAP Constituencies,² from different regions of the world and from different humanitarian crisis types. ALNAP also ensured a mix of organisations that cover medical and malnutrition activities and those that do not. This was based on the hypothesis that monitoring practices in these sectors are more regimented compared with those in other areas of humanitarian action; findings from these sectors would therefore distort the overall findings of the research unless balanced with data from organisations and individuals operating in other sectors.

Additionally, interview and literature selection ensured that specific crises did not dominate: interviewees spanned global and regional roles or worked on crises ranging from Latin America to the Middle East and North Africa, West Africa, East Africa and South-East Asia.



The research team invited all ALNAP Members to participate in the study. Follow-up with specific organisations was then based on the selection criteria outlined above, following purposive and snowball sampling methods.³

Overall, the research process included:

- 1. Literature review:** the research team reviewed documentation from 10 separate organisations, across a spread of ALNAP Constituencies; see bibliography (confidential documents are not listed here).
- 2. Key informant interviews:** the research team interviewed 34 individuals at this stage, from different 17 organisations.
- 3. Cross-team interviews:** a total of 36 such cross-team interviews took place. The research team spoke to individuals across all relevant operational levels for 5 organisations (this was partially achieved for 3 additional organisations).
- 4. Shadowing internal monitoring workshops:** 1 UN agency workshop and 2 international non-governmental organisation (INGO) workshops were shadowed covering an additional 62 monitoring staff beyond the interviews cited above.⁴

The final selection of interviewees came from three donor agencies, three UN agencies, eight INGOs, three national non-governmental organisations (NNGOs), three Red Cross/Red Crescent National Societies and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

Interviewees' responses have been anonymised. Throughout, this Scoping Paper identifies organisations only by their Constituency type, except when making reference to publicly available guidance, policy or tools. All job titles have been changed to 'monitoring officer' or 'senior monitoring officer', as individual job titles can be unique to specific organisations or organisation types.

2.3 Limitations

The aim of this Scoping Paper is to act as a starting point for further discussion and exploration. It is not intended to be exhaustive or representative of all organisations and nuances across the humanitarian system.

It was more difficult to access interviewees for some organisations than for others. Time permitting, it would have been useful to interview more NNGO and donor representatives. Furthermore, other monitoring information users, such as host governments or communities and affected populations, were not included at this stage.

Making a strong distinction between monitoring and evaluation was particularly challenging, as much guidance discusses these together.

Comparison of monitoring practices within the humanitarian sector and others was beyond the scope of this research. Consequently, the findings cannot discriminate between challenges that arise because of the nature of humanitarian action and those that occur for monitoring in all contexts.

2.4 How to read this paper

This document should be read as a whole. Linkages between different sections and issues are highlighted, but monitoring practitioners themselves will likely identify many more.



This scoping paper aims to identify the key issues of monitoring in humanitarian action. Throughout the paper, issues and areas to be explored further, are highlighted in orange and marked with this icon. ALNAP will explore some of these issues in future research. For more information, see Section 6 ‘Next Steps.’

The paper has three principal sections. **Section 3** describes the current state of monitoring in humanitarian action, presenting definitional elements found across organisational guidance and exploring how monitoring information should be used according to policy and how it is actually used according to practitioners. **Section 4** is a summary of the challenges found throughout the development and implementation of monitoring plans at the project level. **Section 5** presents overarching issues found during the scoping phase that affect the quality and use of monitoring information.

There is much diverging terminology in the monitoring of humanitarian action. For ease of comprehension, readers should note how certain terms are used.

‘Humanitarian action’ is defined as action aimed at saving lives, alleviating suffering and maintaining human dignity during and in the aftermath of crises and natural disasters, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for the occurrence of such situations (ALNAP, 2016: 24).

For the purposes of this scoping study, ‘monitoring activities’ and ‘monitoring methods’ are used to denote different monitoring techniques and tools used to gather monitoring data. This study did not attempt to catalogue these.

As discussed in Section 3.2 ‘Who does monitoring’, for the most part monitoring is a common responsibility, with implementing staff having a significant role to play. The phrase ‘monitoring staff’ is used to refer to individuals for whom monitoring is one of the principle elements of their job description.



3 / Current theory and practice of monitoring

3.1 What is monitoring?

“ I’m putting emphasis on these key concepts because there’s limited understanding. People just define them and think that those words don’t mean anything. For me, each of those words means something very, very crucial, which helps us understand what monitoring is all about. ”

INGO senior
monitoring officer

3.1.1 Elements of a working definition

The definitions of monitoring in policy and guidance are fairly consistent across organisations. Their composition is very similar. Moreover, when asked to define monitoring, most interviewees very quickly pointed to the same elements.

Continuous/routine: Some organisational definitions refer to monitoring as ‘continuous’ (Gosling and Edwards, 1995: 81; FitzGibbon, 2007: 3; ACF, 2016: 21; NRC, 2016: 72; Solidarités International, 2016: 1). However, a number of key informants corrected themselves after using this term, preferring to use the term ‘routine’. It may be that the distinction to be made is between monitoring activities and the monitoring function. The monitoring function itself is ‘continuing’ (UNISDR, 2015: 3; ALNAP, 2016), as it encompasses the collection, analysis and use of information. Monitoring methods or activities – means of collecting data – should be implemented in a routine and on-going manner. They have a certain frequency.

Systematic: This term is used to illustrate that monitoring activities are conducted in a planned manner or according to a plan.

Process: Monitoring is a process, made up of a number of steps.

These first three elements are interlinked. For monitoring to be systematic and thus planned, there must be an understanding of the entirety of the monitoring process. Where monitoring is more ad hoc or monitoring activities are not labelled or recognised as such, monitoring is unsystematic but monitoring as a function may be more continuous.

Data and information: Data is information in its most raw form, before it has gone through the necessary steps that enable it to be considered information.

'Data is a term given to raw facts or figures before they have been processed and analysed. Information refers to data that has been processed and analysed for reporting and use' (IFRC, 2011: 32).

Information is 'any data that may inform understanding or belief, presented in a context that gives the data meaning. Information may be true or false. Information only becomes evidence when it is related to a specific proposition' (Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014: 7).

Thus, the term 'information' implies that data has gone through a process of being aggregated, cleaned, analysed and interpreted. But parts of this process can be neglected if the relationship between data and information is not clear, as one interviewee explained, *'When you don't [understand] the two concepts and how they link, you start missing pieces'*. The definitions of monitoring found seldom mentioned quality control or analysis, even though, as discussed below, these are important functions.

Collecting/gathering: This is the implementation of activities to bring together data.

Focus:⁵ This is the centre of interest of a specific monitoring method or activity. Centres of interest relate to different types of change or progress relevant to, but not necessarily within the control of, the project.

This is the final element of our working definition. There are a number of possibilities here. Based on key informant interviews, the research team proposes the following broad categories.

- **Progress against plans** – to track project progress against predetermined objectives, as laid out in project planning documents.⁶

As an INGO country-level monitoring officer explained, it is important to track progress between activities, budget and time. For healthy progress, these three components need to move in sync. As she explained, her organisation is very strong on financial tracking mechanisms but is lacking in terms of the tracking of activities. The organisation does not have an internal system or dashboard that links or brings together these pieces, making any co-tracking difficult.



- **Performance and quality:** More senior monitoring practitioners underlined the distinction between performance, quality and results. For them, it is not enough to look at planned results; one must also compare results against prior experience and quality standards, as well as the needs and expectations of the population targeted by the project. Thus, assessing performance and quality requires a level of interpretation⁷ of the results to understand improvement.
- **Context:** In humanitarian operations, it is particularly important to track changes in the implementation environment that may have a direct effect on the project.

The guidance documents reviewed do not always make clear where responsibilities for monitoring context fall, and whether this is a core part of the monitoring function. However, senior key informants stressed the importance of this area of monitoring. There seem to be a number of context monitoring types (see Action Against Hunger, 2016; Morel and Hagens, 2012; WFP, 2016a), although they are not always clearly differentiated in the guidance. These include:

- To determine if an intervention is needed (for example malnutrition rates or disease morbidity may suddenly increase);
- To determine if there are external factors that may interfere with the on-going project (for example more people moving into an area, roads becoming impassable);
- To determine what effect the project is having on the 'bigger picture', and whether changes are required (for example increased numbers of attacks on people as result of activities taking place near army camps).

The degree to which these fall within the responsibility of monitoring staff differs from one organisation to another.

Another important component to consider is how monitoring information is used. Section 3.1.2 discusses the **purposes** of monitoring information.

As the coming sections show, current monitoring practice does not always match with the definitional elements so commonly repeated across organisational guidance.

Figure 1: Monitoring: Elements of a working definition

Monitoring in humanitarian action

The definitions of monitoring in policy and guidance are fairly consistent across organisations. When defining monitoring, interviewees pointed to the same elements. Here are the key definitional elements found:

Continuous/ routine

As a function it is continuous as it encompasses the collection, analysis and use of information, while monitoring as a method or activity should take place in a routine and on-going manner.

Systematic

This term is used to illustrate that monitoring activities are conducted in a planned manner or according to a plan.



Process

Monitoring is a process, made up of a number of steps.

Data and information

Data is information in its most raw form, before it has gone through the necessary steps that enable it to be considered information.

Collecting/ gathering

This is the implementation of activities to bring together data.



Focus

This is the centre of interest of a specific monitoring method or activity: progress against plans, performance and quality, context.



3.1.2 Purposes of monitoring information

Monitoring is undertaken for different purposes, relating to how the data or information will be used within operations. The policy and guidance documents reviewed offered a considerable list of purposes for monitoring information. However, these were often only named; explanations of them were sparse, with documents not always distinguishing the different purposes or spelling out the exact role of monitoring information (e.g. direct input, indirect input, contributor).

While keeping these limitations in mind, a review of how purposes were prioritised and how frequently they were mentioned generated a loose ranking. Below are the top five intended purposes for monitoring information, presented in order of importance according to the literature reviewed.

Keeping to the project plan during implementation

During project implementation, numerous types of decisions take place. The first use for monitoring information is to help inform quick course corrections or larger scope changes, both with the ultimate aim of better meeting the original plan (e.g. the objectives, expected quality standards and needs as understood when the project was designed). In some cases, this may include adapting to the evolving operational context, but nevertheless with a view to achieving what has been committed to. Monitoring information helps inform these decisions by providing insights into what is currently taking place in the project. In essence, the question being asked is, 'Are we on track, are we achieving what we set out to achieve?'

Note that these decisions do not need to be made by 'management' *per se*. As Action Against Hunger puts it, '[monitoring] is a management tool to assist decision-making' (2016: 14). Implementing staff at all levels may make decisions based on monitoring information.

Improving the relevance and appropriateness of the project

The second purpose relates to improving the relevance and appropriateness of projects. This is closely related to the previous purpose, *keeping to the project plan during implementation*. But, while the first purpose answers, 'Are we on track?', the second considers, 'Are we on the *right* track?' This difference is important, as the type of data needed and the level of analysis required are distinct. The first purpose monitors against the project plan, and so collects information according to this; the second does not assume the project plans (and related activities and outputs) are set in stone, but rather allows for the possibility that they might change. And so, in addition to data on what has been delivered, in this purpose, monitoring collects data on evolving needs or adjustments to the original context analysis. As NRC explains:

'Humanitarian response in an emergency must be initiated quickly on the basis of limited information and an incomplete understanding of the situation. Identification of these information gaps and their inclusion in the monitoring system is of especial importance to ensure that program managers have the data needed to respond to changes in a timely manner' (2014: 1).

Accountability to stakeholders

Next on the list is accountability to stakeholders. This is a crude category: the literature sometimes uses the term 'accountability' on its own, not always explaining to whom it would be or for what. This purpose broadly includes internal and external accountability (e.g. accountability to the affected population, partners, different levels of management and donors as well as their tax-payers).

Monitoring generally provides accountability by demonstrating the results the project has achieved (or not achieved). This may be through a standardised report to donors, or to HQ, or it may be through the provision of information to the crisis-affected people the project is meant to assist. Some monitoring also supports accountability in a rather different way – by including the perceptions and opinions of affected people as data that is regularly solicited or included as part of the broader set of monitoring data.

ACF explains that a good monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system should:

'Collect, analyse, and use information in a systematic and timely way to ensure staff, beneficiaries, and donors have a continuously updated understanding of progress against objectives (effectiveness), to shape field staff decision-making' (2016: 15).

This shows the strong link between this purpose and that keeping to the project plan during implementation. Further to this transparency, monitoring is used to verify that compliance requirements are met (IFRC, 2011; ACF, 2016; DRC, 2015f).

Organisational learning between projects and to inform future projects

This relates to the exchange of lessons learned⁸ across projects not only geographically but also across different implementation periods, as well as the generation of a wider body of evidence. As IFRC explains, M&E provides information to:

'Contribute to organizational learning and knowledge sharing by reflecting upon and sharing experiences and lessons so that we can gain the full benefit from what we do and how we do it' (2011: 6).

Monitoring contributes to the body of evidence for the reassessment of the organisation's portfolio of projects. Monitoring information is used to inform changes to the portfolio of approaches or types of projects on offer. This looks beyond the effectiveness, relevance or quality of the project at hand, asking, 'Should we try this again?' As WFP puts it:

'The overall objective of M&E is to provide knowledge and evidence to further improve programmes and/or to confirm their status as success stories ready for replication and wider implementation' (2016a: 7).

In general, it is often unclear from the guidance whether this learning function is meant to occur directly (e.g. people learn from monitoring data and reports) or indirectly (e.g. data from monitoring forms the basis of evaluations and other learning activities or is included in evidence bundles).

Demonstrating organisational results and improving understanding of contributions

Organisations also aggregate monitoring information from projects in order to better understand their overall results and their contribution to higher-level objectives, goals or impact,⁹ thus helping answer, 'What did our organisation actually achieve?' The perspective of this purpose is distinct as it focuses on what has been achieved overall and is more strongly linked to an organisation's strategy (ACF, 2016: 14). It aims to give an overall picture of global results.

But how is monitoring information used in practice?

Though the above list is not airtight, it does serve as an interesting comparator. As part of this study, interviewees were asked how they were currently using monitoring information, then how, in an ideal world, they would like to use monitoring information. Comparing the theory of monitoring (how policy says it ought to be done) with the practice of monitoring showed some interesting similarities and also some discrepancies.

In general, interviewees suggested monitoring was used for the top three priorities; *keeping to the project plan during implementation, improving the relevance and appropriateness of the project, and accountability to stakeholders*. The main use appears to be for accountability (reporting to donors), followed by decision-making during project implementation (the two purposes of keeping to the project plan and improving relevance). However, accountability to other stakeholders, and particularly to affected populations, is weak, and there is little or no organisational learning or improving the understanding of organisational contributions.

Accountability – through donor reporting and internal reporting

Across all types of organisations, there was a strong sentiment that monitoring information was used principally to compile reports for donors. Based on a few key donor interviewees, it would appear donors are receiving the quantitative data they need to be able to present back to tax-payers 'juicy stats', as one donor representative put it, on what has been achieved with public funds.

Yet donors are not the only audience for monitoring reports. Shadowing of monitoring workshops showed the importance of internal reports. These are often created after monitoring activities and then circulated within teams, and potentially escalated to other operational levels depending on the response in question and the findings. Such reports are a key monitoring deliverable and often represent the beginning of the flow of monitoring information.

However, there is a sense that reporting to donors and to headquarters is still more important than using monitoring information 'on the ground'. Unfortunately, this is still in line with ALNAP's findings from 2003, which stated that:

'Information flows to and from the field were found to be problematic. Monitoring activities currently tend to move information in one direction, with reporting often the driving force leading to data extracted from the field moving to HQ' (ALNAP, 2003: 40).

Informing project decision-making

Interviewees also felt that monitoring information was commonly used for project decision-making – specifically for course corrections in project implementation. Interviewees did not always clearly distinguish between keeping to the project plan during implementation and improving the relevance and appropriateness of the project, the first two purposes found in policy. It is worth noting that, during one of the workshops shadowed, there was a feeling that, in an ideal world, monitoring should be used for ‘actual evidence-based decision-making’, pointing to frustration related to the misuse or underuse of monitoring information as a basis for decisions.

How should monitoring information be used?

When asked what monitoring information should be used for, interviewees most frequently pointed to accountability to affected populations and organisational learning. The use of monitoring information to support accountability to affected populations is a clear area for **further investigation**. Discussions with monitoring staff highlighted some frustration at the lack of appropriate feedback to communities on how monitoring information is used to change projects. Much good practice exists but it does not seem to be recognised and/or documented.

Interviewees consistently raised organisational learning as an area of significant weakness. Monitoring staff openly admitted that it did not happen enough. However, it is unclear whether there is agreement of what organisational learning means and how monitoring supports it. A senior monitoring officer from a UN agency vehemently questioned whether organisational learning should be a monitoring issue at all. In this person’s view, the generalisation of learning across regions and projects was a question best addressed by evaluations. Moreover, as shown through quotes above, a number of guidance documents speak of both monitoring and evaluation information as a support to organisational learning. **Further descriptive work** could help distil what humanitarian agencies understand by organisational learning and untangle monitoring’s role in this.

What does seem to be clear, nevertheless, is that organisational learning is not always given a home. Too often, the activity floats between roles, becoming no one’s responsibility. This is an additional area for **exploration**. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that issues in organisational learning are not specific to monitoring, and thus reach beyond the scope of this research.

Those interviewed did not raise demonstrating or understanding organisational results as a desired use. This may be because of the research’s focus on project monitoring. Nevertheless, a handful of the organisations interviewed (e.g. Norwegian Red Cross, UNICEF, WFP) have in recent years established key performance indicators or strategic-level indicators (see more in Section 4.3 ‘The challenge of mandatory indicators’) to be used across projects and programmes. The aim of these systems is to allow the aggregation of information across operations, providing a higher-level perspective on how the organisation is performing. Hence, the rollout and improvement of such systems – at least in the long term – would support such uses.

Importantly, *'purpose varies by perspective'*, as one INGO practitioner stated. Is it possible to detach users from use? As will come up throughout the remainder of the report, lack of consideration of the user behind the use has emerged as a strong issue.

3.1.3 So, what can be said about the definition of monitoring?

'Monitoring' in humanitarian action involves working with different types of data, in order to provide different sorts of information for different users. It is perhaps best understood as a set of activities rather than a single activity. This means that the scope of monitoring is not always clear within and between organisations, and that what monitoring actually is can be subject to considerable interpretation. A few issues are identified here.

“ 'Monitoring' in humanitarian action involves working with different types of data, in order to provide different sorts of information for different users. It is perhaps best understood as a set of activities rather than a single activity. ”

How is monitoring different from other data collection activities?

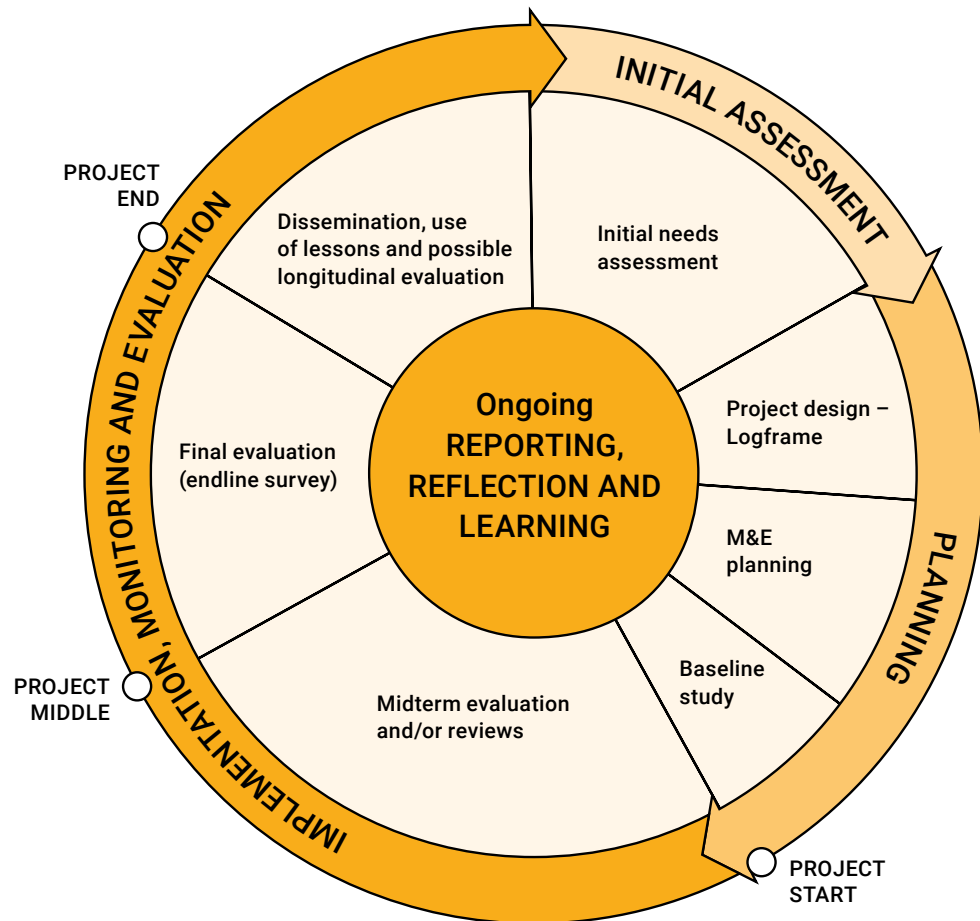
Monitoring in humanitarian action is a broad category of activities intended to provide information. This information can be used in different ways, by different users, at various levels of an organisation or response. Monitoring information is a key component of a results-based approach to project cycle management (by far the most common theory referred to in the guidance reviewed) because it allows managers to keep track of results. It is also a key component of more adaptive and complexity-oriented approaches to programming, because it builds the situational awareness that is central to the approach.

In theory, monitoring differs from evaluation in that it sets out primarily to track progress, rather than to assess its value. It differs from assessment in that it generally refers to projects that are being implemented, rather than identifying whether a need exists, or how to address that need (Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2013). These different objectives entail certain differences in terms of approach and method.

However, as has been seen, the 'classical' boundaries between monitoring, assessment and evaluation, and other functions such as accountability and learning, can be fluid. Context monitoring can serve an assessment function, and monitoring contributes to evaluation, and in some cases fulfils 'evaluation-like' purposes.

This 'flexible' or adaptable role of monitoring is illustrated in the IFRC's diagram of key M&E activities in the project/programme cycle. For the IFRC, monitoring is present throughout the project cycle and is reflected in a number of activities.

Figure 2. Key M&E activities in the project/programme cycle



Source: IFRC (2011: 10).

As one UN agency representative explained, *'There are benefits to vagueness'* – that is, it is useful to have a catch-all term such as 'monitoring'. Monitoring colleagues from INGOs supported this thinking, clarifying that there was value in the flexibility of the term. It is beneficial to have a term for all the information-gathering that happens between needs assessment and evaluation.

Conversely, other interviewees believed organisations had far too narrow definitions of project activities, leading to grey areas between these. One clear example provided by an INGO senior monitoring officer related to where outputs transition to outcomes: it is unclear if this is the responsibility of monitoring or of evaluation. Interviewees explained that, when the borders of monitoring were not well understood, 'monitoring requests' could come too close to needs assessments, evaluation, research, auditing, compliance-related issues or other types of data collection (e.g. market or cost-efficiency analysis).

Moreover, in emergency contexts, where it may be rather difficult to get all the necessary staff, teams may have to 'make do' with less capacity (i.e. low staff numbers, staff with less monitoring experience or weaker skills).



In the acute phase of an emergency, when it is 'all hands on deck', monitoring roles may become more fluid. Monitoring staff pitch in on other data-related tasks such as designing and implementing needs assessments. It is difficult to communicate what monitoring staff should and should not do when the role evolves as the response progresses. In the Red Cross/Red Crescent and other INGOs, this fluidity between planning and monitoring is embedded, as staff wear both hats (e.g. working as Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting or Design, Monitoring and Evaluation officers).

While there are benefits to fluidity, it is important that, at any given time, all those involved understand the priorities of the monitoring function. Otherwise, there is a danger that colleagues or agencies (e.g. donors, implementing partners) will talk past each other. With monitoring being such a broad area, it can be difficult to ensure individuals are referring to the same type of monitoring data, method or use.

Prioritising the different uses of monitoring information

Though agencies share in guidance and policy documents the ideal or desired uses for monitoring information, few offer clear thinking on how the different uses interact with, contribute to or build on each other. Finding a clear prioritisation of the different uses offered is difficult. For instance, the UN International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) states that the monitoring objectives of its results-oriented monitoring and evaluation are linked together in a continuous process:

'Learning from the past contributes to more informed decision-making. Better decisions lead to greater accountability to stakeholders. Better decisions also improve performance' (UNISDR, 2015: 2).

Organisations are more likely to start from the qualities or value of a good, well-functioning monitoring system, while being less clear on which activities monitoring should prioritise.

'A well-functioning M&E system is a critical part of good project/ programme management and accountability. Timely and reliable M&E provides information to...' (IFRC, 2011: 6).

'A well-designed and implemented M&E system should serve as the backbone of our programs, enabling Action Against Hunger to improve projects in real time' (ACF, 2016: 14).

However, considering the situation of limited resources and constant time pressures, it may be helpful to offer monitoring staff greater clarity on how the purposes of monitoring should be ordered.

How monitoring is done comes down to ‘personalities’

A resounding message from this study is that monitoring comes down to the individual. This was stated and restated throughout the different stages of the research. As one INGO staff member said:

‘The message that monitoring is the responsibility of all staff is clear, the policy is clear, but how that is actually absorbed or represented depends on the person.’

Statements such as, *‘It comes down to personalities and people’s backgrounds’* were most commonly heard from INGOs and NNGOs, but also the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement. Interviewees suggested the following ways in which this individuality manifests itself:

- The importance placed on doing monitoring activities;
- The value seen in monitoring information;
- Which monitoring activities and methods are chosen;
- How (seriously or well) monitoring tools are applied;
- The profile of monitoring staff recruited;
- The understanding of why monitoring activities take place.

“ The message that monitoring is the responsibility of all staff is clear, the policy is clear, but how that is actually absorbed or represented depends on the person. ”

INGO staff member

Some individuals have a greater influence over what monitoring resembles than others. Many of the organisations interviewed made it clear that policy favours the influence of senior management at the national or programme level. This can be appropriate: monitoring should be a management tool in that management should set out what information is most valuable or useful and thus should be prioritised (War Child UK, 2014: 8; ACF, 2016: 14). However, two emergency country directors/humanitarian coordinators interviewed described monitoring roles and responsibilities that differed considerably from their respective organisational policies.

In one notable case, the interviewee explained how she preferred to delegate different parts of the monitoring function to different individuals. She made a distinction between monitoring tasks such as tracking attendance and manning a feedback/complaint table, conducted during a distribution done by implementation staff, and tasks looking at higher-level or compliance questions (e.g. Are we delivering to the *right* people? Are we following procedures?), which should be done by ‘independent monitors’. She explained that she preferred:

‘Trying to switch up monitors so that you don’t have the same people working with the same [implementation] team. I prefer [having] a monitoring team that’s based in the capital and they get sent out to different sites and they rotate around.’

There is obviously a tension here, between providing the management data that is most useful in any given context, and to the individual manager, on the one hand, and providing consistency across the organisation on the other.



UN agencies suggested that standardisation could help reduce such manifestations of individuality. WFP explains the introduction of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for project M&E as follows:

'In WFP, Country Offices currently rely on differing processes, methodologies and frequencies to conduct monitoring, even in similar operational contexts. The absence of harmonised standards and procedures, minimum requirements and expectations means that WFP monitoring is overly dependent on the individual capacities, competencies and initiatives of staff charged with M&E responsibilities at any given time. When such staff depart, the processes and systems are likely to deteriorate or be replaced with new initiatives by their successors. This has three undesirable consequences: uneven quality of M&E systems, cost inefficiencies and historical data inconsistencies and gaps that limit the monitoring data' (WFP, 2013: 2).

A potential question for further research is, 'How successful is standardisation as an approach to improving monitoring?'



3.2 Who does monitoring?

Monitoring is very rarely treated as a stand-alone role or activity. By nature and design, it is often combined with other activities. For instance, 'monitoring officers' are not common;¹⁰ staff are DME, M&E, MEAL, MEL, MERL, PMEAL or PMER officers.

Quotes such as the following were common during this research:

'All program officers are in charge of implementing activities AND monitoring them' (Solidarités International, 2016: 2).

'All staff members... are involved in the monitoring and evaluation of their projects and programmes' (War Child UK, 2014: 10).

'M&E: everyone should be involved' (IFRC, 2011: 71).

A number of interviewees spoke of how their organisation had embedded monitoring roles within project teams. In their experience, having monitoring staff in a separate unit or team had a negative effect on the use of monitoring data and unintentionally created the impression of monitoring being an auditing or compliance-checking role.

Nevertheless, seasoned monitoring staff said that, while it was true monitoring was everyone's responsibility, removing dedicated monitoring roles within project teams could lead to loss of the important analysis and interpretation steps. Implementing staff were unlikely to have time or to make time for further interpretation of monitoring data, such as the identification of trends across years or projects.

So, who does monitoring?¹¹ Well, yes, everyone. A better question is, 'Who works on which monitoring step?' This depends on the type of organisation (e.g. UN, Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, INGO), the phase of the emergency, the size of the operation, donor requirements, the size and structure of the project, senior management, the capacity and skills of the implementing and monitoring teams, the context and if access is constrained and, of course, personalities.

Another potential question for future research is, 'Who in an ideal scenario, and who at a minimum, should participate in the different monitoring steps to achieve good enough monitoring information? And what profile should monitoring staff have?' Further literature review could help in this.

3.3 What policy and guidance is currently offered for monitoring humanitarian action?

Policy documents put forward organisations' monitoring approach. These vary in the level of detail and/or directives they offer. For some organisations, they also offer a strategy for the monitoring function, laying out what this should look like and how it will be achieved. They offer advice or set expectations by covering one or many of the elements listed below:

1. **Common definitions of fundamental monitoring terms:** Some of the fundamental terms to define are monitoring, indicators, inputs, outputs, outcomes and impact (depending on the organisation's stance on the feasibility of this level of measurement in humanitarian action).
2. **Clarity on the organisation's intervention logic for monitoring:** How would monitoring ideally contribute to the success of the organisation? This may also reflect or point to overarching frameworks or plans applied at an organisational level, such as strategic plans or corporate results frameworks.
3. **Minimum standards/expectations for monitoring:** This is left intentionally broad. Within this category may fall elements such as policies on numbers of monitoring staff per operation and where this function sits (and to whom it reports), as well as guidelines on budget lines for monitoring (e.g. 7% of operating budgets).
4. **SOPs for developing monitoring plans or systems.**
5. **Descriptions of roles and responsibilities,** and of ideal reporting lines for monitoring staff. In some cases, guidance or policy documents also offer standard job descriptions.

Elements 1 and 2 offer the necessary common ground; these are fundamentals.

The level of structured policy or guidance for monitoring in humanitarian action was not necessarily mirrored by the level of standardised tools for monitoring methods or activities offered (this is discussed further in subsequent sections). In some cases, organisations have very detailed policies but not very detailed tools, and vice versa. To illustrate this, ACF explains its new multi-sector monitoring guidance as follows:

‘For the most part, [these] Guidelines do not proscribe a precise set of tools, templates, technologies, or methodologies for field programs to undertake M&E. Rather, they provide general guidelines, considerations, and steps for creating M&E systems at the project level, and minimum standards of good practice’ (ACF, 2016: 4).

3.4 What tools are made available for monitoring?

Tools are supports to data collection activities: checklists, forms, etc. They are usually accompanied by instructions for correct use.¹² Organisations either offer 1) no to very low levels of standardised tools; 2) example templates to guide country programmes in the development of their own tools; or 3) highly standardised tools to which teams can make minor additions based on their context.¹³

Three factors seem to influence the level of standardisation of tools more heavily:

1. **Decentralisation:** This relates to the structure of an organisation and where decision-making power sits. For example, NRC provides global guidelines for M&E but country offices are responsible for creating their own SOPs. These should ‘define the purpose and principles for M+E, and establish the documents, staffing, and resources needed to operate an M+E system’ (NRC, 2016: 28). They also set out the minimum M&E requirements for each stage of the project cycle. Further research is needed to understand if a distinction should be made between the level of decentralisation of the organisation and of its monitoring function.
2. **Empowerment of monitoring staff:** This factor is strongly linked to the former, yet distinct as it relates more to the culture of an organisation and is specific to monitoring staff. Are staff able and trusted to make the right monitoring decisions? And do they have the training necessary to do so? For some organisations, training does not mean knowing what template to use and how to use it; it is much more important to train staff to be critical and curious (see Box).



Three INGOs were found to strive for more than empowerment. CRS, NRC and Solidarités International strive for monitoring staff to have a critical attitude and strong critical thinking skills. One staff member at NRC talked of developing the programme team's 'curiosity'. CRS has adopted a wider perspective, training all staff on evaluative thinking: 'critical thinking applied in the context of evaluation, motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness and a belief in the value of evidence, that involves identifying assumptions, posing thoughtful questions, pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and perspective taking, and informing decisions in preparation for action' (Archibald et al., 2016; Sharrock, 2016).

- 3. Usefulness of electronic information management systems:** Humanitarian organisations often use intranet systems to support their monitoring functions. These need to be well-structured, organised and accessible.¹⁴ In emergency contexts, staff do not have time to go 'digging for documents'. Within one INGO, this was said to take hours because of the messiness of the system. This makes the use of already available tools or the consideration of past learning difficult, and, especially in acute phases of emergencies, rather unlikely.

The first case of no or very little in terms of standardised tools seems more common in very decentralised organisations, where monitoring functions have a great deal of autonomy at the country and/or regional level. There are strengths to this position, but the lure of being creative and having more flexibility does seem to wear in emergency contexts when monitoring staff need a tool yesterday and there is feeling of constantly reinventing the wheel.

The latter case, of highly standardised tools, was principally seen within organisations with stronger electronic information management systems. For instance, last year, Solidarités International did an audit of its intranet system. The aim of this exercise was to make sure all monitoring tools were included so 'there would be no need for teams to create their own tools'.



4 / Challenges faced in planning and implementing monitoring

This section highlights the choices monitoring teams make while developing and implementing their monitoring. Specific challenges arise here that influence the use and quality of monitoring information. These choices and challenges are loosely structured in accordance with how guidance explains and how interviewees conceptualised the planning, development and implementation of monitoring. **More analysis** would be needed to clearly distil which steps are most followed at the field level and which steps, if any, contribute most to the quality and usability of monitoring information.

A monitoring plan builds on project planning documents, outlining what monitoring will resemble for the project at hand (e.g. what monitoring activities/methods will be put in place, what resources and capacities are needed, what uses are intended for information, how data will be processed). It is important to note that agencies do not always agree on terminology. First, it is very common for these plans to include evaluative activities, thus to be known as M&E plans. Second, some interviewees distinguished between monitoring matrices, plans, systems and frameworks.

Yet guidance documents do not always clearly differentiate these (even using them interchangeably in some instances). For now, and in the context of this paper, a monitoring system and plan are treated as broader than the monitoring



matrix – a table that, in its simplest form, summarises what data is needed and how it will be collected. One question that does arise is, ‘Should more of a distinction be made between these terms and what is lost when not enough of one is made?’

4.1 Trade-offs between robustness and speed

“ M&E is important in any operation, but becomes even more critical in emergencies as the stakes, resources allocated and the needs are higher and more immediate. In reality, however, the need to provide immediate physical assistance becomes more critical than setting up M&E systems from the onset. ”

(WFP, 2014: 8).

The steps proposed within guidance and policy on developing a project monitoring plan were fairly consistent across humanitarian organisations. Yet guidance does differ considerably in terms of the level of formality expected at the different stages of an emergency. Prior to delving into the challenges faced at each step, this sub-section discusses this overarching characteristic.

Some organisations are more accepting of an iterative approach to monitoring plans. Four organisations were identified as having adopted a phased approach to monitoring in their policy: CRS, NRC, ACF and WFP. These are very clear that monitoring is important but that it should not be prioritised over humanitarian action during the acute or early phases of an emergency. Some organisations and interviewees referred to this as a ‘Good enough’ approach, pointing to the Emergency Capacity Building Project’s *Good enough guide: Impact measurement and accountability in emergencies*.

‘[Good Enough] does not mean second best: it means acknowledging that, in an emergency response, adopting a quick and simple approach to monitoring the intervention’s relevance, effectiveness, quality and accountability may be the only practical possibility. Once the response stabilizes, the aim is to review the chosen solution and amend the approach accordingly’ (ECB Project, 2007: 5).

As the emergency progresses and the situation becomes more stable, and monitoring staff have more time, guidance suggests monitoring systems be revised. They should go from ‘light and flexible to stay responsive to the changing context and to the evolving needs of targeted populations (WFP, 2016a: 8–9) to ‘more structured, formal and rigorous, focusing on intermediate-results-level and objective-level monitoring’ (CRS, 2016: module on monitoring methods).

CRS guidance expands further on this theme. In the early phase of the response, monitoring systems should be ‘simple, use-oriented and flexible to accommodate change in context and activities’ but the programme should ‘Create a formal M&E system for the overall response as soon as the situation stabilises’ (2012: 5).

Others refer to early monitoring systems ‘paving the way’ for more rigorous systems (WFP, 2016a: 8–9). Mercy Corps is moving towards a phased approach. An internal review of monitoring systems developed in acute



“ In emergency response, the purpose, type and rigour of monitoring changes over time. ”

(CRS, 2016).

emergencies showed response teams were eager to apply appropriate monitoring activities and methods but, with little time and a lack of dedicated monitoring staff available during the early phase of responses, they were relying on tools and methodologies from previous emergencies. These provided decent data but were not tailored to the specific response needs and were difficult to build on.

In response, Mercy Corps has adopted an approach that can be scaled as the response progresses, no matter what monitoring activities are chosen. Guidelines for common activities as well as a set of modular data collection tools have been developed and trained. These tools include a broad range of industry standard or peer-reviewed questions that cover different response scenarios. The modular format allows teams to customise data collection to each unique emergency through the quick merger of tools and the selection of questions. Moreover, the pre-identification of appropriate questions and responses allows for the scale-up of monitoring activities, something that can also support evaluations at the response, regional and agency level.

Organisations differ in what level of formality is desired: some agencies, like Mercy Corps, expect at least some good data to build on; others, such as ACF, expect a more complete plan but accept some compromises (see Box).

ACF shares the following list of compromises to the M&E system that are often necessary in emergencies:

- Constrained timeframe for training enumerators and piloting M&E tools;
- Greater reliance on non-probability sampling methods;
- Using paper-based systems rather than electronic systems, which require more capacity-building (also for security purposes);
- Not collecting lists of beneficiaries when doing so would compromise the safety of programme participants and/or staff;
- Relatively more emphasis on assessing needs and on outputs rather than outcome monitoring;
- Remote monitoring/supervision (e.g. pictures) rather than in-person monitoring/supervision.

Source: ACF (2016: 48).

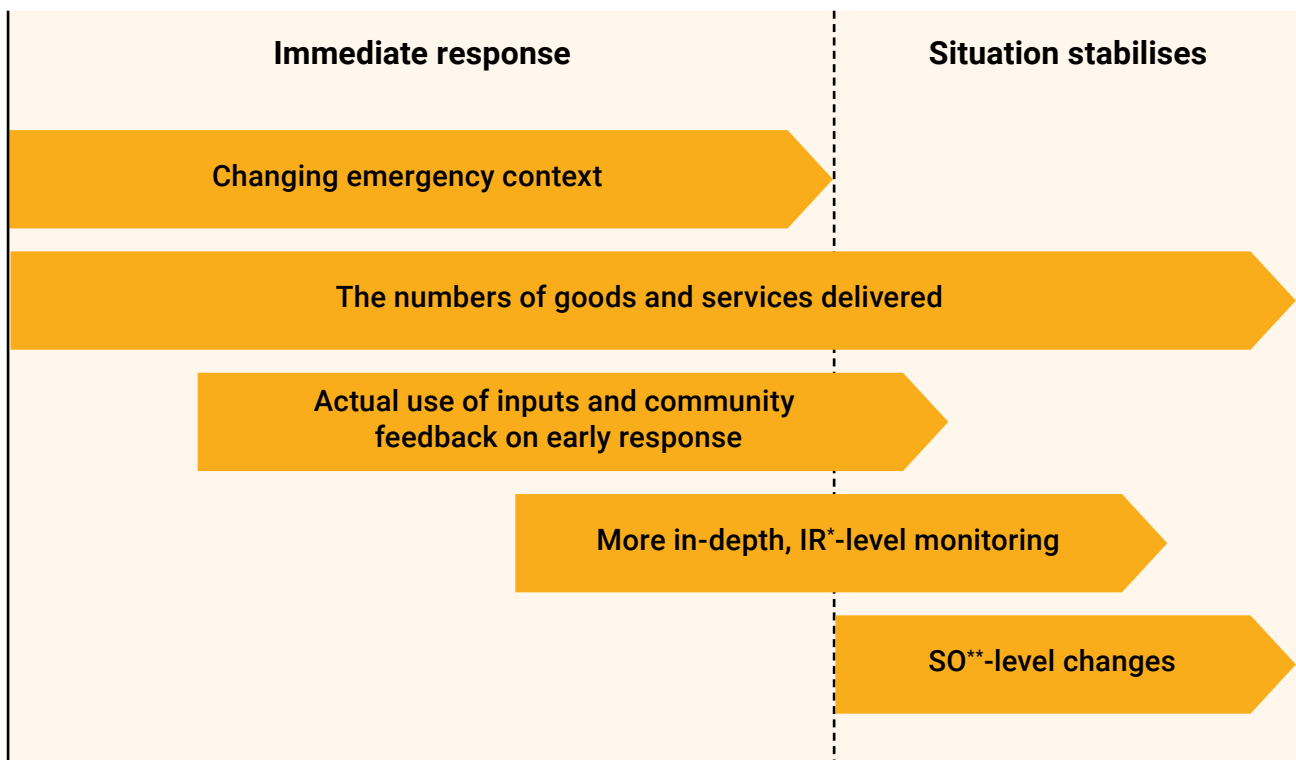
4.2 How do you know what you need to know?

Most of the guidance reviewed on how to develop a monitoring plan starts from the same implicit or explicit question: ‘What monitoring information is needed?’ The monitoring team sets the scope (level of detail and what is included) and purpose (definition of why monitoring is necessary) of the monitoring system. Agencies tend to answer these questions in one of two ways:¹⁵

1. By referring to the project plan and project indicators;
2. By referring to the phase of the response.

Guidance from WFP (2016a) and ACF (2016), for instance, starts from the project logframe and indicators. CRS starts from the question, ‘What do we need to know at this phase of the emergency response?’ As Figure 3 shows, the information needs change as the response progresses.

Figure 3: Progression of monitoring in an emergency response¹⁶



***IR**: Intermediate result: states the expected change(s) in identifiable behaviours by participants in response to the successful delivery and reception of outputs.

****SO**: Strategic objective.

Source: CRS 2016: module on monitoring methods.



For CRS, identifying changes in the context and tracking the number of goods and services delivered must commence right away. This is then used to help refine which indicators are to be tracked.

This research did not focus on the process of developing or choosing indicators. There was a concern that indicators would become too time-consuming of an issue. However, complaints about this topic were shared far less frequently than expected. Policy and guidance documents generally suggest indicators should be chosen in the following order:

1. **Donor requirements;**
2. **Standard organisational indicators** (see section below):
 - Key performance indicators or strategic-level indicators;
 - According to Sphere Standards or organisational good practice;
3. **Project-specific indicators** (relating to specific knowledge needs).

Again, this suggests that, in practice, the most important function of monitoring is to provide accountability to donors.

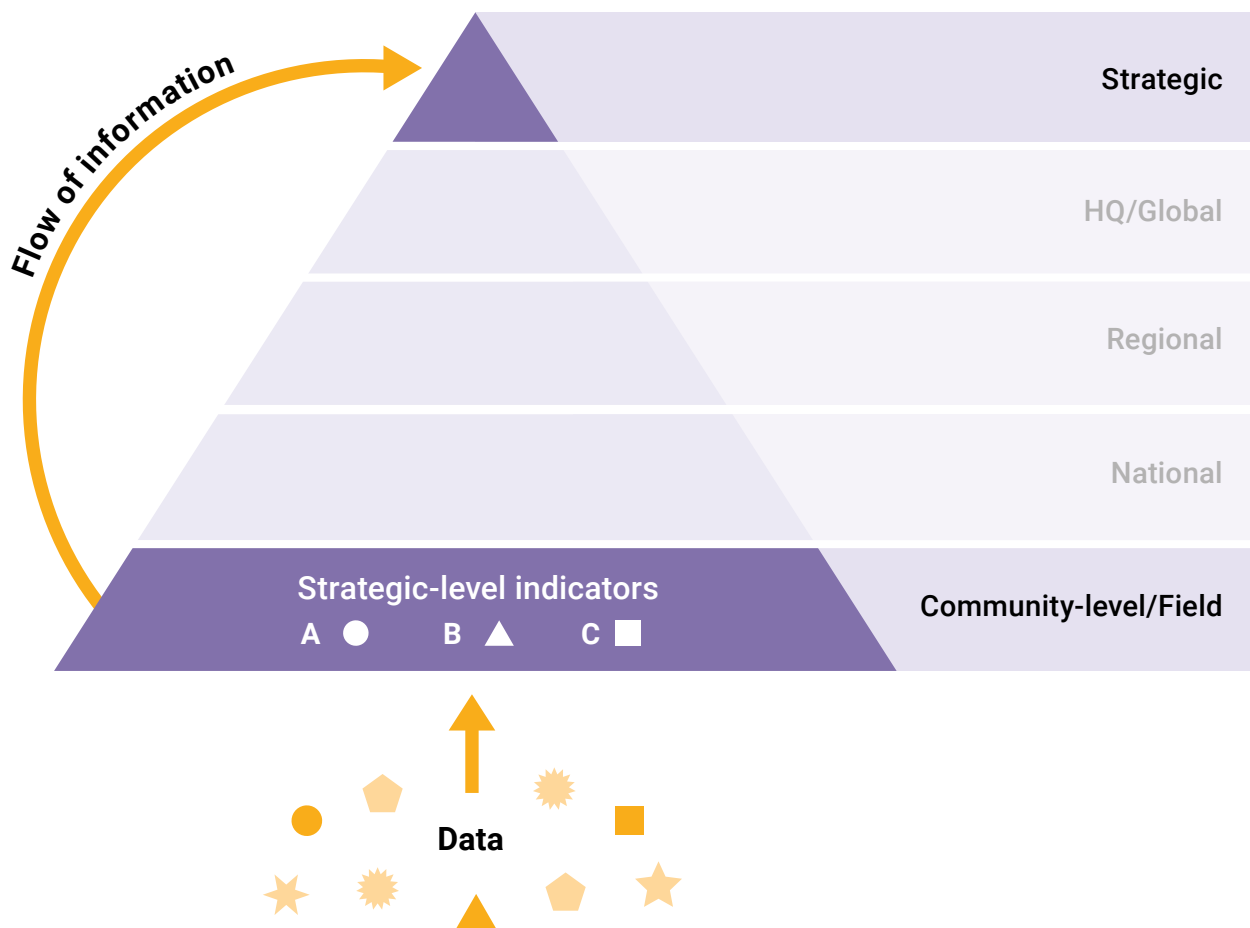
4.3 The challenge of mandatory indicators

A number of organisations have rolled out across their operations the tracking of key performance or strategic-level indicators (e.g. Norwegian Red Cross, UNICEF, ACF and WFP). Names vary but the thinking is the same: projects are responsible for tracking against a set of indicators, allowing a degree of aggregation across the whole of the organisation to assess how it and its implementation partners are progressing towards or contributing to strategic areas or global objectives and commitments. These indicators aim to fulfil the purpose of *demonstrating organisational results and improving understanding of contributions* (see Section 3.1.2 above).

Nevertheless, imposing such indicators was found to have some shortcomings. First and foremost, the data gathered is not necessarily relevant or useful to project implementing staff. Monitoring staff pointed to this issue in different ways (see figure 4).

- One organisation said it did not know how to facilitate the flow of this information through all levels of an organisation. **Information jumps from the field level to a strategic level**, bypassing other levels of management.
- Another organisation pointed to its indicators becoming blinders – blocking out important information. **Data that did not fit one of the indicator ‘pigeon holes’ was not seen as important** and thus project staff did not register it.

Figure 4: Indicators and the flow of information



The two issues shown in this figure relate to the process of obtaining and disseminating information for monitoring, but were not found to happen concurrently.

NRC may have found a way around this for its internal reporting. In its case, project teams are provided with a choice of outcome indicators. This allows teams to choose what will provide them with the most useful and relevant data for their project while also satisfying higher-level requirements (NRC, 2016).

4.4 Integrating monitoring into project planning

Broadly, monitoring policy and guidance agree that the development of a monitoring plan should be done based on project planning documents (be these logframes, theories of change, etc.). This should be done with the support of monitoring staff (NRC, 2016: 18–19; ACF, 2016: Section 2.3; WFP, 2016a; IFRC, 2011; War Child, 2014; Solidarités International, 2016). Nevertheless, stories of monitoring staff only seeing planning documents after they are submitted and/or approved are rife.¹⁷ This evidently causes a number of challenges, top among them are being when indicators or specific monitoring methods or activities are unrealistic or simply unreasonable.

In one case, monitoring staff expressed frustration at not being privy to budget information. In some instances, they were not even provided with the budget line for monitoring activities or budget lines were too generic to allow for the identification of what had been budgeted for such activities. In another organisation, monitoring staff explained how the monitoring budget line was always the first to be cut. Monitoring staff who have been involved explained that, during negotiations with donors, when planning documents are exchanged, reviewed and revised, funding for monitoring activities is always the first item to be reduced.¹⁸

4.5 Data troubles

4.5.1 Emphasis on data types and indicators, rather than on data use

Many of the guidance documents reviewed dictate what sort of data to collect in some detail, laying out types of monitoring and monitoring activities. However, they do not always make clear why this data should be collected, or how it will help the project. Compounding this, intentionally or unintentionally, many templates for monitoring matrices start from indicators. This may lead to monitoring staff becoming more concerned with the data to be collected than the purpose it is intended to serve, thus detracting from its use.

4.5.2 Choosing monitoring methods or activities

When asked to describe the thinking behind the selection of specific monitoring methods or activities, all key informants started from the question of, 'What information is needed?'¹⁹ However, they were quick to add other considerations, such as, 'Do we have access to the context and affected population?', 'What capacity do we have for data collection?', 'Who will be gathering the monitoring information?', 'What capacity do we have for data analysis?' and 'How much budget is available?' Clarifying the steps monitoring staff most commonly follow in practice may be an interesting area for further research.

Organisations such as WFP (2014) offer very prescriptive guidance on what monitoring activities or methods should be used when, and with what frequency. Others, such as CRS, support staff in the ‘intentional selection of monitoring methods’ (CRS, 2016: monitoring methods module). For instance, in its guidance, CRS explains that, to choose monitoring activities, staff need to start by answering two key questions:

- **Do we want to ‘count’ or do we need to ‘check’?** That is to say: do we need to collect all relevant data or just a sample? The former helps you track progress on activities, while the latter helps you determine the effectiveness and appropriateness of the response.
- **Do we want formal versus informal monitoring?** Meaning, is the monitoring activity/method helping answer pre-determined information needs? Informal monitoring activities/methods identify information needs that can then be followed up by a formal monitoring activity/method. (ibid.)

At this point in monitoring design, it is important that staff step back to consider the feasibility and relevance of the overall monitoring plan. CRS was the only organisation found to provide clear, written guidance on how to *think* through the selection of monitoring activities and methods both individually and as a whole,²⁰ in the form of clear questions for consideration. If organisations do not instil this type of thinking, they run the risk of monitoring staff collecting too much information or attempting to collect information that is difficult and expensive when better alternatives are available.

4.5.3 Balancing primary and secondary data

Interviewees did not often make the distinction between primary or secondary data. The IFRC’s *Project/programme monitoring and evaluation guide* explains that, while designing a monitoring and evaluation plan, it is important to consider the availability of reliable secondary data:

‘Because it can save considerable time and expense. It can also be used to help triangulate data sources and verify (prove) primary data and analysis collected directly as part of the project/programme. However, it is critical to ensure that secondary data is relevant, [credible] and reliable’ (2011: 33–34).

In practice, teams may dismiss secondary data on the grounds of relevance, credibility and/or reliability. As one senior INGO monitoring practitioner explained, ‘We are always instructed to go see the community ourselves’. She went on to explain that, within her organisation,²¹ they should not use secondary data because they do not know what the thinking, theory or intentions of other organisations might have been while collecting this data.²² As another senior monitoring officer explained, secondary data may not always fit the uses intended for monitoring information.

This may be a question for **further investigation**: Do organisations aim to make their data available for secondary use? Why or why not? What is missing to make such data more useable by other agencies?





“ One strong frustration of monitoring staff relates to the over-collection of monitoring data. The issue is not one of too much data but rather one of too little good data. ”

4.5.4 Collecting the right amount of data

One strong frustration of monitoring staff relates to the over-collection of monitoring data. The issue is not one of too much data²³ but rather one of too little good data. Monitoring staff can find themselves overwhelmed by the amount of bad quality, irrelevant, not useful or not useable data they have to sift through. Predominantly, this situation seems to arise because not enough time is invested in planning what needs to be collected, and how it can be collected to an acceptable level of quality (see Sections 4.5.1 and 4.5.2 above). Additionally, if data collection for monitoring activities is not built into the overall project implementation process, there is a risk of teams relying too much on stand-alone data collection activities. This can lead to redundant data. Failing to understand what monitoring information is most needed and useful, as well as how ‘two birds can be killed with one stone’ (in terms of when data is collected, how it is collected and how it will be used), can lead teams to continue to expand the step of data collection.

However, this issue goes two ways: monitoring staff do not know what is needed and other staff do not know what to expect of monitoring. Practitioners shared examples of having to gather information pre-emptively to mitigate against unexpected information requests. Both internal and external users of monitoring information (such as donors) often make additional requests which were not included in the original plan. Anticipating this, monitoring staff may over-collect data to account for unplanned monitoring questions and demands, instead of stating that the request is beyond the scope of the original remit.

As one senior INGO monitoring officer explained, lack of consideration of what data is useful to the project, and just collecting for the sake of collecting, can have much graver consequences. She gave the specific example of measuring cross-cutting issues (e.g. gender, protection):

‘I’m not saying that [cross-cutting issues] are not important, but I’m saying that there needs to be a balance. We end up asking [affected people] all sorts of things, “Have you been harassed? Has anyone harassed you?” etc., etc., and then we cannot do anything about it, because are not mandated... but we are monitoring that. So to me, this is another danger that comes within the industry. We want to be so respectful of all these cross-cutting issues, we might end up expending resources and losing the true purpose of the monitoring.’

4.5.5 Getting from ‘what’ to ‘how’ data

One core difficulty observed is the shift from capturing the ‘what’ to assessing the ‘how’. Monitoring staff explained the ‘what’ as the tracking of activities done and services and products delivered. This is the basis of most monitoring, and is particularly important for accountability and reporting purposes. This also links to the first purpose of monitoring found: *keeping to the project plan during implementation*. A second and equally important function, if monitoring information is to be used for improving the project (rather than simply for

“In a humanitarian setup, there’s always this theme of we want less complex things [because] we don’t have the time, or we want to monitor things that you can easily see, or we want to do things that are easily quantifiable... So monitoring tends to be associated more (I don’t say exclusively, but more) with what is easily quantifiable. “I did 50 trainings.” “I reached 50 people”... Conceptually, you find that it is the default position.”

Senior monitoring officer

reporting), is to delve into what is being done well and how to improve quality, effectiveness or appropriateness. This links to the second purpose of monitoring: *improving the relevance and appropriateness of the project*.

Critically, however, the ‘what’ data must be gathered so these ‘how’ questions can be investigated. As a result, any difficulties that occur when monitoring the ‘what’ can have knock-on effects on the monitoring of the ‘how’.

One solution offered by both an INGO and an UN interviewee is for organisations to have a standard activity tracking template or online system. As they explained, in some regions, staff are so busy trying to simply capture the ‘what’ that it is not possible to capture, let alone examine, ‘the how’.

‘The absence of [a common activity tracking tool] is actually a drama, because the little energy and manpower available in the field for monitoring is fully wasted in running after the granular data from the [implementers and] partners, because it’s not in an organised system.’
UN senior monitoring expert

The ‘how’ requires more consideration of qualitative data and thus an understanding of methods for the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Monitoring officers from INGOs and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement highlighted the collection and aggregation of qualitative data as areas of weakness in humanitarian action. As a senior monitoring officer explained, often very useful qualitative data is collected but it is then not seen as ‘monitoring data’.

This could be a worthwhile area for **future research**. During the scoping phase, interviewees did not elaborate (nor were they asked to) on what is challenging specifically. More discussion would be necessary to focus this topic.

4.6 Getting from analysis to use

After data is collected it needs to be aggregated, cleaned, analysed, interpreted and disseminated so it can be used. In this scoping stage, the research team focused on analysis, interpretation and dissemination, given the profiles and interests of interviewees. The steps of analysis, interpretation and dissemination are combined differently from one organisation to another. Broken apart, these can be described as follows.

- **Analysis** – helps transform data into usable information. This may include comparing groups and sub-groups, identifying differences and similarities, identifying trends and creating summaries (CRS, 2016: analysis, interpretation and use module).
- **Interpretation** – attaching meaning to data or finding meaning in the data. This may include explaining findings and making inferences, drawing conclusions and making recommendations and presenting patterns within

a clear and orderly framework (CRS, 2016: analysis, interpretation and use module). Interpretation is the process of answering the question of 'so what?': 'What does the monitoring data mean for my work?'

- **Dissemination** – the sharing or circulation of monitoring information to stakeholders for accountability and transparency reasons but also, principally, so that it can be used. This step includes the drafting of internal and external reports, and other broader communication elements.

In general, interviewees suggested that interpretation did not often appear as a stand-alone step and dissemination was narrowed down to reporting, because other activities such as reviews and evaluation take over broader (internal or external) dissemination tasks.

Analysis, reporting and dissemination responsibilities tend to be assigned to different roles in different organisations. In War Child UK, the country M&E officer carries out analysis. CRS (2016: analysis, interpretation and use module), on the other hand, says that 'it is critical to include the programming team in the analysis and use of information. Monitoring is not just about reporting; it is about what we will do with the findings. This requires input and discussion by the entire team. Based on these joint discussions, the report should include recommendations for actions to take based on the monitoring findings.' This was supported by a senior monitoring officer, who expressed that, '*Analysis should be done together*', between project staff and monitoring staff. Without this, context and project nuances are not always clear, which reduces the relevance and usefulness of recommended follow-up actions.

4.6.1 Analysis loses out because of poor planning

A clear message from key informants is that a focus on collecting data eats into time that could have been dedicated to analysis. In some cases, there is no time left for analysis, and the raw data is used for reporting but not for any more constructive decision-making.

The focus on collection also tends to decrease time available for planning. Cutting planning has knock-on effects on analysis; two such effects were found at this stage in the research:

1. Time is simply not allocated to analysis activities.
2. Time is not taken to consider the wider monitoring process and/or to create an analysis plan, meaning there is no exploration of what information is most needed or useful, and little consideration of what capacity, skills or tools are necessary at the analysis stage.

As one INGO interviewee put it, '*You go wrong [in planning], you go wrong everywhere!*'

Participants in the War Child UK and DRC workshops shared a number of other potential inhibitors to analysis. These are listed below.

- **Restricted capacity:** Monitoring teams do not always have the skills necessary for this step, as thematic technical knowledge is required and it can be time-consuming to coordinate with such experts.
- **Lack of consequences:** Senior management may not see the value of monitoring information, other than for reporting purposes. Monitoring is at times so donor-driven that further analysis is not expected and thus not conducting analysis has no consequences.
- **What more can we really learn?** Following the law of diminishing returns, field monitoring staff suggested that they had to consider whether the further investment of resources into analysis would yield learning whose value is equal to or greater than the resources invested.
- **Fear of bad findings:** Potentially contributing to the prior two points, monitoring staff may be concerned as to they will uncover by conducting further analysis. This also relates to broader organisational issues related to not having a culture of learning that values constructive feedback.
- **High turnover:** This means that background information, such as why decisions are made or nuances regarding the context, gets lost. Another element here is that 'balls get dropped': interesting monitoring questions are not fully pursued because of changes in staff.
- **Irrelevant data:** Poor training or low capacity lead to the collection of bad monitoring data that is simply not worth analysing.
- **Poor information management systems:** The research team observed some frustration with regard to poor (or hardly existing) information management systems. The level of resources and tools made available in this regard seems to vary considerably by agency.

4.6.2 Remembering the 'so what?'

'Monitoring staff are bad at communication' was a common complaint heard during the key informant and cross-team interviews. After some prodding, it became clear that this is often not solely a communication issue. It is true that, in many cases, monitoring staff do not present findings using the appropriate terms or language (e.g. strategic or executive language) for users. However, on many occasions the problem is that monitoring staff are not offering the level of analysis or interpretation users expect. The problem is one of substance, not of communication.

This is as likely to result from unclear expectations as it is to be a consequence of inability on the part of monitoring staff. Often, monitoring staff and monitoring information users have not openly discussed and agreed on what level of analysis and interpretation is expected.



One monitoring team shared an example from the acute phase of the Hurricane Matthew Response in Haiti. A more junior monitoring officer was made responsible for pulling out five findings from routine monitoring activities for the emergency director. These were shared on a daily basis via email. Was it appropriate to give a junior member of staff such a responsibility? We cannot know. However, an agreement was made, expectations were made clear and the emergency director had a straightforward channel for feeding back to the monitoring team on what information was most needed. As such, it was more likely the monitoring information was timely and useable for this senior decision-maker.

4.6.3 Poor dissemination or poor information flows

A UN M&E team that had recently worked in a large emergency response described how monitoring staff could often act as the central point for information flows. If there are blocks in this flow, such as poor management, breakages in communication channels or difficulties in how information should be escalated, monitoring staff can de facto become the best-informed people in the operation. Moreover, monitoring staff can be held accountable for monitoring information not reaching the intended user. Therefore, even if there is no fault in their dissemination activities, monitoring staff can become the middleperson for or bottleneck to vital operational data.



5 / Overarching issues

5.1 Where is all the good practice?

As one UN monitoring expert explained:

'All the science is there. So, any [monitoring] challenge I am facing, I never feel like I have to invent a new solution. Any situation I face, I know it's already been faced... So it's more about filtering, selecting and collecting good practice.'

“Any situation I face, I know it's already been faced... So it's more about filtering, selecting and collecting good practice.”

UN monitoring expert

As a number of interviewees highlighted, this last part is very difficult. Even within agencies, monitoring staff do not always feel they are able to share good practice, be this tools, guidance or SOPs, across regions, let alone across organisations. Only informal communities or exchange mechanisms for humanitarian monitoring practitioners across organisations were found and these strongly relied upon personal relationships. This often leads to frustration as staff know they are reinventing the wheel unnecessarily.

5.2 Considering users

Throughout this research, interviewees raised concerns that pointed to a lack of consideration and prioritisation of not only different uses but also (and maybe more importantly) different users.

The information needs of different uses and users can contradict each other. With limited time and resources, project teams in effect compromise the relevance and usability of monitoring information for day-to-day decision-making if they (even unintentionally) focus on donor reporting, for instance.

Would it be possible to design and implement a monitoring plan that prioritises specific users and uses while also fulfilling other stakeholder requirements? And what elements of a user profile should be considered in this (e.g. role, operational focus, expectations)?



5.3 We need an agreed taxonomy

“ Strong monitoring staff are extremely good translators: they can think between different donor requirement terminologies and data structures (e.g. standard logframes); they can speak to senior management at all operational levels; and, depending on their role or organisation, they can speak Cluster or sector argot. ”

INGO monitoring expert

When starting this project, the research team pondered whether to develop a taxonomy of monitoring terms. However, the question quickly became, ‘What is the added value of a taxonomy compared with the resources it would require?’ Developing a taxonomy is easy; getting agreement across organisations (in particular the range of organisations represented in the ALNAP Membership) is no small task. Such an exercise would have taken away from the development of an understanding of the current state of monitoring in humanitarian action and the identification of issues affecting monitoring information’s quality and usability. But can we say that the need for an agreed taxonomy is one of these issues?

There is indeed confusion between organisations on key monitoring terms, demonstrated by different donor requirement simplification and harmonisation efforts (NGO VOICE, 2015; ICVA, 2016; Gaston, 2017). Key informants shared examples as simple as the following:

- **Project versus programme:** Definitions may be clear on paper, but in practice, for a large organisation like UNICEF, a small project could be equal to a huge programme at a small INGO. Does this or should it affect definitions of outputs and outcomes? No, but it does complicate things.
- **Activity:** As one UN monitoring expert explained, there is not even agreement on what is a project ‘activity’. He provided the following example: How should we describe vaccinating 50,000 children? Is this an activity or an output of a set of activities (e.g. buy the vaccines, arrange logistics, hire nurses)? In practice, both can be correct, depending on who you ask. Even within the same organisation the answer can differ.

Yet, beyond cross-organisational communication issues, what problem does this cause for monitoring staff at the project level?

Strong monitoring staff are extremely good translators: they can think between different donor requirement terminologies and data structures (e.g. standard logframes); they can speak to senior management at all operational levels; and, depending on their role or organisation, they can speak Cluster or sector argot. This is not an easy skill to acquire.²⁴ It takes a great deal of time, and mistakes or miscommunications are very likely. This is not to mention the complications involved when organisations try to collaborate.

Moreover, these fundamental terms have internal and external reporting implications. Coming back to our previous example, should an 'activity' have targets and indicators? Well, it depends on how you are using the term. Going further, an INGO monitoring expert explained:

'The words "activity" and "output" are used interchangeably in informal settings to communicate a range of points – and would be understood in those contexts without too much commentary. This is often because these words exist in normal vocabulary and are not restricted to M&E, humanitarian aid or work life... Technical use requires specification because there are implications for the M&E system. E.g. the difference between an output and an activity matters once we are looking at what gets measured as a final product, and why.'

5.4 Reaching outcomes

Interviewees, especially monitoring advisors, also said projects had difficulty measuring outcomes (let alone impacts). A senior INGO monitoring officer explained it best:

'Humanitarian agencies have, historically, and I would say even currently, had a tendency to want to shift their result levels down. So what they would define as their outcomes has often been just adding up all their outputs.'

According to interviews, practitioners are not adequately capturing outcomes in the sense of behaviour changes (actions, relations, policies, practices at the level of individuals, groups, communities, organisations, institutions or other social actors) directly or indirectly brought on by a project (ALNAP, 2016).

This issue seems to link to difficulties in terminology as per the prior overarching issue ('What do we really mean by "outcomes"?') but also to the need for better methodologies to capture these in emergency settings. As UNICEF recently found, 'The [UNICEF Humanitarian Performance Monitoring] approach is currently better at reporting accomplishments towards activity and output targets than it is assessing the quality of interventions or their outcomes' (Perry, 2016: 7). This most likely relates to the challenges identified organisations not being able to capture 'how' data (see Section 4.5.5 on 'Getting from "what" to "how" data').

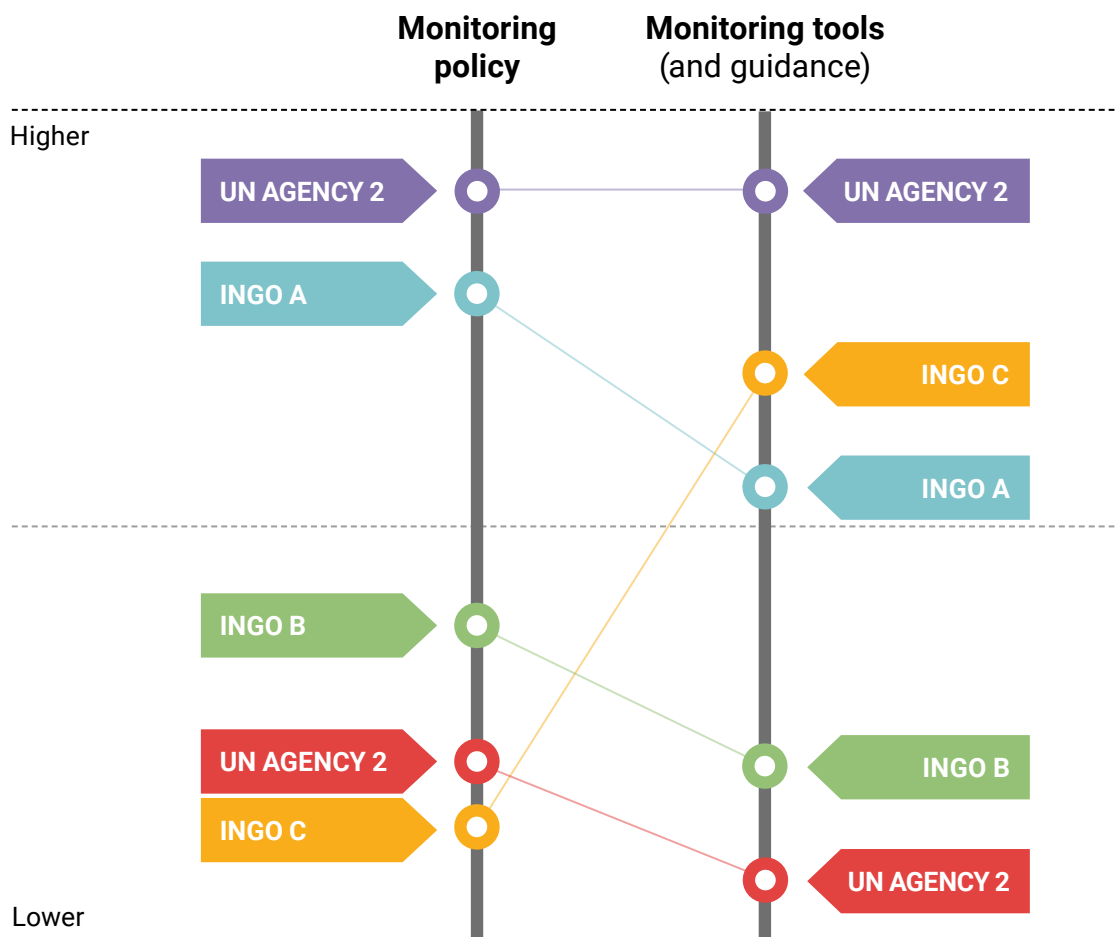
Further research on this topic could potentially lead to a better understanding of where this issue stems from and how to resolve it. Lessons could be learned from other sectors in this regard.



5.5 Finding a standardisation balance

When starting this descriptive exercise, the research team expected monitoring policy and monitoring tools to go hand-in-hand: the more documented, structured and standardised an organisation’s monitoring policy, the more documented, structured and standardised monitoring tools would be as well. However, things are much more nuanced and a number of spectrums exist. Based on the documentation found or shared, and specific practical examples provided by key informants, the research team has developed the following illustrative spectrums.²⁵ From the small sample examined, it seems that, unlike UN agencies, INGOs and NNGOs can be very standardised in terms of guidance and policy but hardly at all in tools, or vice versa.

Figure 5: Standardisation spectrums



These illustrative spectrums show the comparative level of standardisation for five organisations. The spectrum to the left shows the degree of standardisation for monitoring policy across the organisation. The spectrum to the right shows the degree of standardisation for monitoring tools and the instructions on how to use these tools.

The standardisation of humanitarian monitoring policy and tools takes place for many reasons (see ACF, 2016: 4, for instance). Yet it often seems that organisations do not critically assess what is gained AND what is lost from increased standardisation, as well as how these decisions correlate with views across the organisation.

Is it more important to be able to aggregate monitoring data to a global level or to ensure monitoring information is useful and relevant to decision-makers at the project level? It is simplistic to boil this issue down to such a question. Nevertheless, organisations have to prioritise these, at times, conflicting monitoring uses. Once uses have been prioritised, it is possible to work out which monitoring information is most important and clarify minimum quality and practice standards. This will then help unclutter what needs to be standardised.

5.6 Fulfilling expected monitoring skills

Expectations of monitoring staff are high. Their implicit list of responsibilities can be very long. They may be asked to act as ‘translators’, as discussed above, back-stops for quality control and cross-cutting issue compliance, researchers, evidence advocates, trainers, workshop facilitators, etc. These tasks, in addition to more explicitly monitoring ones, require specific skills and knowledge sets. Yet many topic experts pointed to weak hiring practices for monitoring staff in humanitarian organisations, chiefly because of a lack of consideration of the skills needed. **More investigation** would be needed here to understand why this occurs.

It is still common practice for staff to transition from more programmatic roles to monitoring roles. In at least one UN agency, monitoring roles are desirable as they are more permanent and do not require any specialised training. However, and also because of weak monitoring training within organisations, such generalists are not always equipped to smoothly take on these roles. Even seemingly simple solutions (such as having a set monitoring induction pack for the organisation) are not always in place.

Similarly, in many donor organisations, though monitoring is seen as important, staff receive limited training, if any. Technical (with sector-specific skills) or regional advisors within donor agencies reported adopting ‘monitoring roles’ or completing ‘monitoring tasks’ during field visits. However, for the most part it is assumed they know about monitoring because of their considerable field experience. **Further discussions and literature review** would help clarify what specific monitoring activities or methods are being used, and if and how staff could benefit from tailored training.

Furthermore, closer to the project level, monitoring is not always done by monitoring staff or even trained staff. For certain monitoring activities, such as tracking attendance, volunteers are responsible for this monitoring.



Yet there is a risk of the pendulum swinging too far and the opposite problem emerging. In a few instances, senior monitoring advisor roles have been given to very qualified methods experts with little humanitarian field experience.

6 / Next steps

This scoping phase has identified a number of issues and pinch points that negatively affect the quality and use of monitoring information in humanitarian action. In 2017–2018, ALNAP, in consultation with its Membership, will start the process of refining and prioritising these. Up to four issues will be taken forward for more in-depth research or guidance development.

For more details on this process and on how to get involved, please contact the ALNAP Secretariat.

Annex 1: Concept Note

Descriptive Exercise of Monitoring in Humanitarian Action

Rationale

The 2003 ALNAP Annual Review of Humanitarian Action focused on monitoring. It identified a number of issues with the practice, first and foremost being a general lack of clarity on the meaning of the term. It found a high level of uncertainty on where monitoring fits in agencies' thinking and practice, and multiple monitoring approaches were seen as overlapping. It goes on to explain:

Along with each approach and each agency come monitoring guidelines and manuals. This in itself is part of the problem – each individual agency has developed its own system and approach, leading to a lack of harmonisation, over-complexity, and multiple monitoring requirements from different donors. Given the multiple approaches as well as the different responsibilities of agency staff, the picture is one of considerable complexity (2003:28).

Since then, even with the consistent acknowledgement of the need for improvement, few advances have been made. Varied activities still fall under the title of 'monitoring': most operational agencies will be collecting different types of information for different donors, for project management purposes, to support situational assessment, and conceivably for the clusters. Reviews such as the State of the Humanitarian System have repeatedly cited the weakness of humanitarian monitoring systems (ALNAP, 2010 and 2012). Monitoring is frequently listed as a key limitation in humanitarian evaluations; compromising their rigour and the credibility of their analysis while also acting as an inhibiting factor to the relevance and quality of their findings and conclusions.

Furthermore, demands on monitoring have grown as agencies aim to incorporate feedback from affected populations into programming, to measure outcomes as well as outputs, and to remotely monitor work in challenging contexts. Demands will only increase in coming years due to system-level discussions and commitments post the World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain.

The confusion in activities, types, levels and purposes of monitoring hinders the discussion and analysis on how to improve the quality and use of this source of evidence. As an initial step, ALNAP will undertake a **descriptive exercise to map the current landscape of monitoring in the humanitarian sector**. This aims to plot the perspectives and priorities of different actors (e.g. sources, gatherers, users and influencers), the purposes and uses for this data, as well as the processes, policy, procedures and standards applied to it.



Thematic scope

A large part of the confusion around monitoring, as an area of work, stems from the considerable number of overlapping and complementary categories of activities, types, levels and purposes. To better conceptualise the topic and help us narrow the scope, we developed the following table. It sets out different means of explaining or categorising 'monitoring'. These overlap significantly. The list is not meant to be exhaustive or prescriptive, it will be refined during the inception phase of the research.

Ways of categorising 'monitoring'	Description	Possible examples of this monitoring
By level in the results chain	At which level in the logic model of the organisation, programme or project?	Inputs/expenditures, outputs/ activities, outcomes/results, impacts
By areas being monitored	What component of the operation is being observed?	Context/situation, activities/ process, results
By level of operation	How far does the monitoring data go within the organisation? To what level is the monitoring data synthesised?	Project, programme, organisational or institutional, response (cluster, country or region), system
By timing and frequency	When does this monitoring take place in the project cycle?	Prior to planning the project, while planning the project, throughout the project, snapshot during project, end of project
By type of programming activity	How is the monitoring data gathered?	Feedback mechanisms, after action review, peer review, third party monitoring, early warning system
By responsibility	Who is responsible for the gathering of the monitoring data?	Specialist within team, common responsibility, expert advisor, partners
By type of crisis or response	What type of data is being gathered based on the context?	Predominantly qualitative or quantitative data, collected electronically or on paper, sectorial data necessary

Using this table, a series of scoping decisions were made. Firstly, for the purposes of this research, monitoring does not include needs assessments, reporting or evaluation (By type of programming activity). These will be treated as distinct activities that can contribute to or benefit from monitoring data.

Secondly, to avoid the research becoming too diffuse, ALNAP decided to focus on the level of single agency project (By level of operation). This may touch on country-level monitoring depending on the responses studied. Monitoring at

higher levels of operation is likely to be specific to strategic objectives and goals (be these organisational, response-specific or system-wide) reducing the level of generalisability possible. Hence, activities relating to multi-agency, cluster or large-scale emergency frameworks will be excluded.

Thus, the principal focus of this work will be monitoring at the project-level.

This research will use an iterative approach. The definition, research questions and methodology will be assessed and adjusted throughout the investigation in the hope of creating a more accurate representation of the monitoring landscape in humanitarian action.

As a starting point, ALNAP will use the following preliminary **definition**:²⁶

A continuing function that uses systematic collection and analysis of data to track progress on specified plans and check compliance against set standards. This considers data both internal and external to the project to help assess the achievement of objectives and the use of allocated funding. Further consideration of monitoring data helps identify trends and patterns, adapt strategies and inform decisions for project/programme management.

Limiting ourselves to our thematic scope, our **preliminary high-level research questions** are as follows. These are explored further in the methodology section.

- What is monitoring?
- What questions lead to the gathering of monitoring data?
(Alternative phrasing: Why or why not is monitoring data gathered?)
- How is monitoring data gathered and when?

Methodology

This piece will not provide an in-depth assessment of every agency's monitoring frameworks. It will instead provide a 'bird's eye view' or the topography of project monitoring. The descriptive exercise is intended as a tool to facilitate further investigation by the ALNAP Secretariat and others. The ALNAP Secretariat will use it in 2017 to identify gaps, tensions and blockages that are hindering the quality and use of monitoring data, and would benefit from detailed research or guidance.

The high-level research questions have been broken down to cover a number of angles. These will be refined as the research progresses, but at this stage they have been utilised to elaborate possible approaches that will be combined to make up the methodology.



Sub-questions	Possible sources	Potential approaches
What is monitoring?		
How do policy and guidance documents define monitoring?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy documents • Guidance documents, • Training material, • Policy-makers and monitoring advisors at HQ-level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Observing training sessions • Structured Interviews
How is monitoring understood in practice?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring system internal reviews • Learning documents produced by project teams (e.g. lesson papers, after-action reviews) • Staff in regional and country offices (both MEAL and non-MEAL staff) • Evaluation reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Semi-structured interviews across project teams • Shadowing project teams
What is the definition of monitoring? Who should define monitoring and why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior monitoring experts from across ALNAP constituencies • Job descriptions • Academics • Independent consultants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review of policy documents • Interviews
What questions lead to the gathering of monitoring data? Why is monitoring data gathered?		
What is the purpose of monitoring data? How is purpose determined? What comes first: deciding why to gather monitoring data or deciding what monitoring activities will be done?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance and policy documents • Senior monitoring experts from across ALNAP constituencies • Staff in regional and country offices (both MEAL and non-MEAL staff) • Academics • Independent consultants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Consultation with select group of experts • Semi-structured Interviews • Dyadic interviews
How is monitoring data used in practice? Does this match with the original intended uses?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring system internal reviews • Senior monitoring experts from across ALNAP constituencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Dyadic interviews • Shadowing • Observation
What are the incentives or disincentives to the use of monitoring data?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring system internal reviews • Learning documents produced by project teams (e.g. lesson papers, after-action reviews) • Senior monitoring experts from across ALNAP constituencies • Academics • Independents consultants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Intra-team interviews • Dyadic interviews • Shadowing • Observation

How is monitoring data gathered and when?		
What are the specific activities used to gather monitoring data?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance • Review of project literature • Review of monitoring reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review
How do monitoring activities differ across organisations? And why do they differ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy documents • Guidance documents, • Training material, • Project planning documents • Monitoring reports • Staff in regional and country offices (both MEAL and non-MEAL staff) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Dyadic interviews • Focus groups • Inter-team interviews
How frequently is monitoring data gathered? Is this sufficient to fulfil the purposes of that monitoring data?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance • Project planning documents • Monitoring reports • Learning documents produced by project teams (e.g. lesson papers, after-action reviews) • Evaluations • Independent consultants • Staff in regional and country offices (both MEAL and non-MEAL staff) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Intra-team interviews • Focus groups • Dyadic interviews
Who gathers monitoring data and where?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance documents • Job descriptions • Project planning documents • Monitoring reports • Senior monitoring experts from across ALNAP constituencies • Staff in regional and country offices (both MEAL and non-MEAL staff) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Semi-structured interviews
How are project monitoring (or MEAL) plans designed? How do project teams determine which monitoring activities to use?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance documents • Senior monitoring experts from across ALNAP constituencies • Staff in regional and country offices (both MEAL and non-MEAL staff) • Learning documents produced by project teams (e.g. lesson papers, after-action reviews) • Evaluations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Semi-structured interviews • Dyadic interviews • Shadowing • Observation • Workshop



The following considerations were used to help select the most appropriate methodology for the desired result. The strict limitations on the research team (e.g. time, budget, travel) were also used in this process.

Methodological considerations

- How to ensure that we have not overlooked an issue or missed a part of the exercise?
- How to maintain a balance across the known and unknown factors that may affect monitoring in humanitarian action?
- How to avoid overemphasising minority approaches or challenges?
- How to maintain a higher-level perspective overall?

Two key elements for the research design will be maintaining an iterative approach and the continuous triangulation across sources and data collection approaches.

Thematic considerations

- Organisations have their own unique guidelines and policies for monitoring, but at a project level this may be heavily influenced by donor demands.
- Humanitarian staff may or may not have received formal training in monitoring. Depending on the organisation, monitoring roles may be centralised or decentralised (focused mainly in the field) and centred in specific units or mainstreamed (everyone's responsibility across teams).
- Organisations understanding and use of monitoring data may be influenced by actor type, organisational culture/ethos, areas/sectors of specialties (purely emergency relief, health, or activities closer to international development).
- The different types of monitoring (by area in a project) overlap significantly.
- Monitoring needs may change by sector.
- Monitoring activities and resulting data (e.g. qual/quant, digital/paper-based) may be context/response dependent.
- Monitoring activities and data is tightly linked to other project cycle activities.
- Monitoring data is gathered at one level of the operation but synthesised for use at many.

Proposed methodology

As specified above, this methodology is malleable and intended to support an iterative approach. The research is divided into five key stages, these will be used to progressively build, test, adjust and further elaborate the description of MHA, so that it may be used to identify specific areas that could benefit from further research.

Stage	Approaches included
Literature Review – goal: to hone preliminary definition of monitoring, develop draft framework of MHA and elaborate interview protocol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy, guidance and training material review • Establish a select group of monitoring experts to act as ‘critical friends’
Cross-team interviews – goal: to refine framework and start adding detailed descriptions and examples of nuances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi-structured interviews with ‘monitoring experts’ (purposive sampling and snowball sampling) • Cross-team semi-structured interviews at all levels of a project: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview recognised monitoring person at project-level, • completed by interview with non-monitoring person in same project • Interview MEAL advisors/experts at regional and HQ level for each project chosen • Review of monitoring reports and other learning documents
In-depth interviews – goal: gain a better understanding of issues raised throughout the research so far	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dyadic interviews (matching interviewees from different rounds of interviews, projects or organisations based on common issues and challenges)
Analysis – goal: finalise the descriptive exercise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consult critical friends • Validate description with all interviewees
Prioritisation – goal: identify challenges/gaps/tensions to be validated and prioritised with ALNAP Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use workshops, trainings and one on one discussions to validate issues identified • Prioritise issues based on needs of ALNAP membership, ALNAP’s expertise and what would have the biggest impact on performance in the humanitarian sector

How you can contribute

ALNAP will be looking for support from the ALNAP Membership and beyond in:

- The retrieval of organisational literature on monitoring humanitarian action. This may include: guidance, standard operating procedures, training resources, lessons papers, evaluations of monitoring systems, monitoring reports, etc.
- The identification of monitoring experts who could participate in key informant interviews.

For more information, please contact Alexandra Warner, ALNAP Research Officer for Evaluation, Learning and Accountability, at a.warner@alnap.org.



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Endnotes

- 1 The names of all critical friends and other proofers are listed in the acknowledgements.
- 2 The ALNAP Constituencies are donor organisations, UN agencies, independent academic organisations and experts, the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, non-governmental organisations and the private sector. This stage of the research did not include academics, researchers/consultants or private sector actors.
- 3 Research was conducted in English, French and Spanish. Nevertheless, most of the literature reviewed was in English, and French and Spanish interviews were not intentionally sought out.
- 4 The workshops attended were the Inter-Agency Workshop on Monitoring and Evaluation in Emergencies organised by the WFP Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as WFP Latin America and the Caribbean Emergency Monitoring and Evaluation Package training for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) officers; the global-level Danish Refugee Council Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Network Event; and the global-level War Child UK and Holland Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning Forum.
- 5 Within some agencies, these would be referred to as 'types of monitoring'. However, comparing ALNAP's 2003 summary of types (performance monitoring and situation monitoring) and approaches of monitoring to current guidance shows that, for some, lines have blurred between types and approaches. The monitoring practice described by this scoping study did not draw on these 'types of monitoring' as it did not always resonate with field-level practitioners and was found to be misaligned with the core focus of this research: improving utilisation of monitoring information.
- 6 Log frames, theories of change, results framework, etc.
- 7 In the sense of 'attaching meaning to data or finding meaning in the data' for users (CRS, 2016), rather than just analysis. Section 4.6 'Getting from analysis to use' discusses the differentiation between analysis, interpretation and dissemination.
- 8 CRS describes lesson learned as 'an experience that can be generalized from a specific project context to improve programming in broader situations' (quoted in CRS MEAL Glossary, 2015).
- 9 Depending on an organisation's theory of change or stance on the feasibility of calculating impact.
- 10 Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting (PMER) Officer; Design, Monitoring and Evaluation (DME) Officer; Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (PMEAL); Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) Officer; Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Officer; Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL) Officer; Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Officer.

- 11 Of the organisations included in this research, most have put much thought into types and levels of monitoring staff. Yet the nuances and exceptions within organisations and the differences between organisations are so great that it was not possible to create a taxonomy for levels of seniority.
- 12 This is related but distinct from guidance on specific monitoring activities or methods, such as good practice notes on how to conduct a focus group or key informant interview.
- 13 It is important to note that some specific sectors, like nutrition, have set indicators, methods, levels of analysis and deliverables that are very well dictated and followed. The three cases discussed here exclude these.
- 14 Take for example the Central African Republic, where internet connections are weak at the best of times. For one INGO, it did not matter how user-friendly or helpful the grant tracking system might have been, when it took three hours to upload a single indicator the solution was dropped.
- 15 NRC does not fit either of these. For this organisation, the answer to what information is needed depends on the level of results being tracked (output, short-term outcome, medium-/long-term outcome) (NRC, 2016: Section 2). Currently, only NRC is found to operate in this way, therefore 'results level' was not added as a third lens.
- 16 Intermediate results and strategic objectives are part of CRS's Proframe, or Project Framework. These are equivalent to the immediate and intended effects that other organisations and donors know as 'outcomes' (CRS MEAL Glossary, 2015).
- 17 One interviewee noted that the opposite was also true. This research primarily spoke to monitoring staff; the 'other side of the story' did not emerge in this stage of the research.
- 18 It was not possible to verify this with donors or examine when this may happen in proposal processes from the donor's perspective.
- 19 It is important to note that this is what interviewees stated, hence the slight contradiction with other findings.
- 20 Other organisations may provide this in MEAL training packages or the like that were not reviewed during the research.
- 21 This finding may be sector-specific. This organisation works in only a handful of sectors. For instance, it does not do cash programming.
- 22 This reflects the findings of an ALNAP paper on the quality and use of evidence in humanitarian action (Knox-Clarke and Darcy, 2014). The authors offer six criteria of evidential quality, the final being 'clarity around context and methods'.



- 23 There is one strong exception here: the Syria response has thrown a wrench in the works, with a great deal of resources invested in monitoring activities. Experts consulted pointed to the overwhelming amount of monitoring data, leading to more emphasis being placed on information management and analysis activities. One INGO, for instance, has regionalised a large part of information management activities (e.g. data processing, creating dashboards and maps).
- 24 NRC has even created 'translation tables' for more junior staff in country offices, to compare NRC terms with those of different donors.
- 25 An organisation's placement is relative to that of other organisations. To be clear, the aim of these is to illustrate where organisations sit across both spectrums and the nuances between agencies. The spectrums are innately flawed as they show only a small sample of organisations and, since the highest level of monitoring standardisation is not known, the end of the spectrum is marked by the highest example found in the sample.
- 26 This definition will be further elaborated or refined as the research continues. For now, the definition is based on guidance by ALNAP (2016 and 2003), IFRC (2011), Sphere (2011 and 2015).



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