Evaluation in constrained access situations

A session held during the ALNAP Evaluation Skills-Building Day, facilitated by Lewis Sida.
13 February 2017, Stockholm

The ALNAP Evaluation Skills-Building Day has become a regular part of the ALNAP Annual Meeting. Evaluation in constrained access situations was one of two sessions in the afternoon of the Evaluation Skills-Building day for the 31st ALNAP Annual Meeting in Stockholm. It is a topic of increasing importance and interest as agencies find their work taking place in intractable and dangerous conflicts such as those in Syria and South Sudan.

This skills-building note contains a brief summary of the skills-building process, followed by a summary of the issue discussed under the four headings: management, data, capacities and risk.

Method

The session used the ALNAP peer-learning methodology. 17 people took part in the session from a wide range of backgrounds, and from across all ALNAP constituencies. The depth and range of experience made the peer-to-peer method particularly appropriate as all participants had extensive knowledge of the subject area, and first-hand practice to share.

The peer-learning methodology is straightforward. Participants form groups of three and spend roughly half an hour sharing an unresolved experience relating to the broader theme. The story-teller provides a short introduction of the case study, some context and identifies a problem or dilemma associated with it; the group then discusses the case study offering insights. First there is positive and reinforcing feedback, then critical observations, followed by a discussion around approaches or solutions. In the variant of the peer-learning method used in Stockholm, groups were also asked to identify a couple of generic issues to take forward into the second part of the session.

The second half of the session was dedicated to looking at a set of higher level issues that the groups had identified with regards to evaluation in constrained access. A carousel method was used to explore these further. Four issues were identified – management, data, capacities and risk – and groups moved four times to ensure that all participants spent time on each issue. Inputs were recorded on flip charts and one person per group stayed behind at each switch-over to explain the previous discussion.

Antecedents to the Evaluation Skills-Building day session

ALNAP has been exploring the issue of evaluation in constrained access for several years. The Evaluation of Humanitarian Action (EHA) Guide has a section on constrained access, emphasising the importance of evaluability assessments, outlining a number of innovative data gathering methods and emphasising the importance of credibility, or rather the need to be transparent about accuracy. It also sets out some alternative options such as remote monitoring or peer-learning.
ALNAP has also helped convene a number of workshops, starting with joint work in the UK with the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) and latterly also with UN OCHA in Amman, Jordan. These have emphasised various concerns around risk transfer, data quality and sharing, and highlighted the use of alternative methods for data collection, from radio tagged goods to Participatory Rapid Appraisal over Skype. The rise of third-party monitoring as a tool has been a constant backdrop to these discussions. The increased reliance on third party monitoring in constrained access situations has led to new considerations about who is responsible for the security of workers.

Results of the peer-learning and skills-building session

Discussions within the ALNAP group at the Skills-Building session were similar in nature to those in earlier workshops. Similar themes of risk and data quality were raised, although interestingly both management and capacities were more prominent than in previous discussions. This partly reflected the experience and position of the participants, but may also partly reflect the growing body of experience in this area. As evaluators and evaluation managers have been more routinely confronted with evaluating programmes in areas where there is little or no access, they have become more attuned to the detail of how they are managed and the kinds of capacities that are relevant (and the lack of these capacities).

There is also, not surprisingly, a growing body of practical knowledge in this area. More and more evaluations have used Skype with key informant interviews (KIIs) in remote access locations, or hired third party teams of enumerators to undertake surveys. A growing sophistication of the technology involved – tablet-run surveys are becoming routine – allows for better oversight of teams (GPS and time tracking mean you can verify if enumerators visited the locations specified). And agencies have begun thinking about how to use social media as a tool to understand user satisfaction of aid, although this is still in its infancy.

There are a number of issues common to evaluation practice more generally that have proven equally intractable for places with limited or no access. Uptake is chief amongst these – how to get managers and policy makers to engage constructively with findings. Giving proper feedback to the communities consulted is another, made more challenging by the fact that it may be dangerous to do so (for both aid providers and affected communities).

The following is a summary of the issues discussed under the four headings: management, data, capacities and risk.
1. Management

The management of constrained access evaluations may require both a different approach and a different level of resources than for exercises not facing this limitation. This is because things are likely to change often – the environment is highly fluid – and therefore evaluation managers may need to be more involved (meaning more time). There is also a judgement call to be made about whether an evaluation is appropriate given the ability to collect reliable data, and the risks involved for those doing so.

### Issues highlighted by workshop participants

| Commissioning agencies need to understand risk. They should routinely conduct risk assessments, and understand their relevance. |
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| Evaluation managers should critically examine whether it is the right time to undertake an evaluation (considering the risks and volatility). |
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| Limitations in managing/micro-managing. Flexibility and adaptability is necessary in volatile environments. |
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| Terms of Reference (ToR) should use language that gives flexibility and is less rigid with regards to methodology. Objectives need to be extremely clear if other elements of the evaluation are subject to adaptation. Contexts are volatile and need room for adaptability; this includes budget alterations either between, during, and after drafting ToR. |
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| Better, more frequent communication between all stakeholders; this includes communication agencies, evaluation team, senior management, and beneficiaries. Constant feedback and incorporation of up-to-date information mechanisms during inception phase and managing stakeholder expectations. |

### Suggestions for ways forward:

- Evaluability assessments should be completed during the inception phase of evaluations; to review and re-review quality of secondary data, as well as adapt tools to the context.

- Undertake initial scoping work to determine whether key informants and affected communities can be accessed. Following this determine whether the evaluation is feasible or realistic. Be realistic about what is achievable.

- Set up regular meetings and scheduled calls between the evaluation manager and evaluation team to facilitate close communication. Incorporate feedback on a regular basis, treating evaluation plans and timetables as iterative.

- In such contexts, there is a need to work with experienced evaluation teams who understand the risk, interpret the reality on the ground and react accordingly.

- Consider employing people with deep experience of this kind of work as a coach/mentor/advisor if the team requires additional help. This could be established as a resource to the evaluation team to provide support and assess data.
2. Data

There is a growing body of knowledge and practice as highlighted above. Several donor agencies have guidelines on evaluation in constrained access, as well as the ALNAP EHA Guide already highlighted. There are some good practices beginning to be established with regards to third-party data collection\(^1\), although these are quite informal for the time being.

Issues remain, however. Data sharing is a major issue as agencies have legitimate security concerns in most situations of armed conflict. And the reliability of ‘key informants’ can be another huge issue, when these are often the same gatekeepers to aid and involved in the conflict themselves.

In time, the evolution of the current body of work will result in a growing suite of tools. Knowing what can be done in different contexts, the reliability and safety of these techniques, and the time and resources required will help both in planning and commissioning evaluations, and in delivering quality outputs.

### Issues highlighted by workshop participants

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<tr>
<th>Difficulty in collecting rigorous quality evidence in constrained access contexts. The solution is framed around the importance of existing monitoring data: Built in ‘good monitoring’ enables a decent evaluation.</th>
<th>How to strengthen mechanisms such as beneficiary feedback/complaints/needs assessments? How to engage local leaders in the evaluation process?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluability assessments are key to managing expectations, and should be done as routine with a realistic appraisal of data availability.</td>
<td>Capacity of evaluation to create new data.</td>
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<td>What might the evaluation process cost in terms of risk to stakeholders/beneficiaries?</td>
<td>Which mechanisms/tools would be most suitable for answering evaluation questions?</td>
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<td>How to avoid bias.</td>
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### Suggestions for ways forward:

- Strengthening monitoring data.
- Local capacity building and training. Better access to community leaders. These in turn could better support the data collection process.
- Use multiple mechanisms and methods to gather data and triangulate information. Be extremely conscious of power relations and cultural barriers to information collection, adjusting for these where feasible.
- Suggestion that there be further establishment of guidelines, building on the EHA guide. ALNAP can act as a resource hub for materials relating to evaluation in constrained access.
- Application of satellite imagery and artificial intelligence.
- Interoperability of systems (coordination/data sharing).
- Increased community participation.
- The application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to establish trends on social media. Social media in some contexts is very heavily used (Syria is a classic example). Algorithms of the type deployed by Google and Facebook to fine tune advertising could theoretically also be used to highlight top trending topics relating to aid, or access, or other topics of interest in such social media conversations – yielding valuable quantitative data.
3. Capacities

There is a growing capability of national evaluators and monitoring staff as their use has increased exponentially in constrained access environments. Often nationals are the only people who can travel and work in difficult places – Syria and Somalia, amongst others. Whilst there are ethical concerns around the risk, this also creates opportunity for an increased global cadre of monitoring and evaluation staff. This in turn has led to an increase in the availability of advanced courses for national evaluators; Kenya alone currently has seven masters level M&E courses.

Despite the increase in need and opportunity for skilled nationals from the countries in crisis (or from neighbouring countries), the demand still outstrips supply. And there are cultural blockages – agency staff can be less forthcoming with a colleague from the affected country; writing styles may be different and language skills may not be as advanced. Unnecessary risks may be taken by less experienced staff in the pursuit of rewarding work. This is an area that needs to be nurtured, but also needs careful engagement to avoid exploitation.

Issues highlighted by workshop participants

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<th>Lack of trust in national evaluators. National evaluators do not always get the same access to international agencies as international evaluators do. When they do, international staff may not always share the same level of information or engage in confidential discussions.</th>
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<td>There is a need to build better networks of M&amp;E staff. This might include mentoring systems using senior staff familiar with international evaluation standards to coach those still developing their skills.</td>
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<td>Bringing different stakeholders together can be difficult.</td>
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<td>A big constraint is getting more skilled national evaluators. In many contexts, national evaluators can access difficult areas because of superior knowledge or acceptance.</td>
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Suggestions for ways forward:

- Accreditation for national evaluators. This will give confidence to potential employers that national evaluators have the right skills for the task, and provide a structured route into evaluation work for national consultants.
- Awareness raising/coaching during evaluation for both national evaluators and for agency staff, to ensure rigour and appropriate tool and method selection, and how to appraise evidence.
- Use of technology and advanced digital tools, such as drone technology, mobile phone data, and satellite imagery.
- When it comes to designing evaluations, for instance, it is important to remember to ‘Ask the right things to the right people’.
- A collective evaluation approach? Due to there being a heavy reliance on third-party remote monitoring, the focus of ToRs should be placed more on capacities and on an improved M&E system.
4. Risk

Risk and risk transfer not surprisingly recur as one of the main themes in commissioning and managing evaluations in constrained access. Constrained access situations are almost always conflict situations, or places where territory is administered by groups hostile to foreign aid agencies. The very notion of constrained access means 'too dangerous to go to' in almost all cases (although arguably geographical remoteness might also qualify).

In such circumstances the practice of using people from those places to deliver and monitor aid has become routine. Often it is the only way of delivering lifesaving aid, and as this has become the norm in most aid contexts regardless of security, on one level it is merely a sub-set of a wider trend. Nevertheless, it leaves an uncomfortable set of moral issues for aid agencies, especially when third party contractors are employed who are willing to take greater risks than the commissioning agency.

Increasingly there are tools being developed to assess risk and to adapt programmes and M&E to varying contexts. CARE international uses different sets of standard operating procedures (SOPs) depending on the level of risk. UNICEF uses the concept of ‘programme criticality’ to assess whether a piece of work should go ahead (including evaluation). In both cases, risk matrices are integral to the decision-making process, and in both cases making the judgement about the level of risk remains the most challenging.

**Issues highlighted by workshop participants**

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<th>Definition</th>
<th>Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>Definitions used in assessing risk need further work. Besieged area/hard to reach/access limited can mean different things to different people. Understanding the context can be difficult, especially when things change quickly. A more established, better defined, more universal system for categorising risk would be helpful.</td>
<td>When transferring risk to third parties, does the risk change?</td>
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<td>Saving lives vs. requiring access to gain information for an evaluation. Does the risk change?</td>
<td>Different degrees of risk, how to assess and identify risk.</td>
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<td>Risk vs. value added and assessing risk thresholds. It is necessary to consciously assess the value of an evaluation. Is it possible to ensure that the level of data collection is 'worth it'?</td>
<td>Duty of care. Consider the risk to people who may be involved in or affected by the evaluation: the contractors and risk posed to beneficiaries.</td>
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<td>Donor pressure and managing donor expectations.</td>
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**Suggestions for ways forward:**

- Organisations should develop (as far as possible) standard operating procedures for evaluations, linked with organisational security protocol/risk assessments. This means that at different levels of risk, new security procedures might need to be adopted, or different judgements made about the balance of risk vs. outcomes.
- Link evaluability assessments with risk, angled in such a way so that there is more of an assessment of the risk involved.
- Also conduct a political risk assessment with regards to sharing evaluation. What are the implications for beneficiaries/national evaluator staff?
• What strong connections or engagement does the project have with current and former staff? Use these individuals as key informants in the evaluation.
• Ensuring a strong connection between risk assessment and the M&E system. Placing greater emphasis on ‘context monitoring’ where risks posed are becoming unacceptable.
• The design of the evaluation protocol should be considered early so that this can be embedded in the monitoring system.

Conclusion

The half day ALNAP Skills-Building session on evaluation in situations of constrained access was an opportunity for a rich and wide ranging exchange of experience and knowledge. Some of this is captured in this short note; a set of tools and guidelines is also being shared amongst the participants to build on the subject matter explored.

Working in dangerous and restricted places is sadly a fact of life in modern aid work. This does not look set to change in the immediate future, and if anything may become more widespread. Generating evidence on what has been done in such contexts is arguably more important than ever – providing one of only a limited set of insights to managers and policy makers on the effectiveness of the action. Learning how to do this safely and accurately is imperative. ALNAP’s work in recent years is part of facilitating the generation of this knowledge, and the recent Skills-Building day demonstrated the experience that exists and the value of convening such conversations.

End notes

1. See for instance: Secure Access In Volatile Environments (SAVE).

This summary captures some of the key points discussed by workshop participants and as such does not necessarily reflect ALNAP’s views.