



LESSONS LEARNED PAPER

EXPERIENCES WITH REMOTE WORKING IN A TIME OF RESTRICTED MOVEMENT AND SOCIAL DISTANCING

This note pools Tana's experiences with remote forms of working in development. Its main conclusion is that much development work remains feasible but it's approach may need adaptation and flexibility. The experiences from working in conflict environments where movement is often restricted demonstrate that this adaptation is possible. What is needed is a methodology relying more on local capacities, enhanced use of remote validation techniques and using the online communications and survey platforms now available. The lessons learned provide insights into new climate friendly ways of working post COVID-19.

Remote working is not new

The global COVID-19 crisis has seriously restricted movements and ways of working within development assistance that rely on direct interaction between stakeholders in the same physical space. New social distancing regulations are

preventing physical meetings and traditional classroom format training events. International consultants are unable to travel, and national experts are also experiencing restrictions. The constraints are being felt right across the development assistance sphere – from research to programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

But, while the COVID-19 crisis has dramatically changed parts of our working environment, at least temporarily, the restrictions over travel have some parallels with conditions already affecting our work in crisis and conflict-affected areas. As described in the box below, ways of working in conflict have emerged from which we can learn. In other cases, mixed methods combining home-based and in-country activity often form a normal part of the project

process and it is possible to adjust the balance so that greater use is made of methods that do not require travel or close physical presence. For the majority of our direct stakeholders with whom we interact, the variety and quality of modern communications technology (including mobile and tablet-based platforms) now available opens up new possibilities for remote working.

Box 1: Lessons from working in Somalia

In Somalia, remote or mixed survey tools are used where security constraints prevent non-Somalis from conducting primary data collection. Online GPS platforms provide a means for collecting, synchronising and presenting data via mobile devices that local enumerators operate in the field. This can be augmented by remote Key Informant Interviews using WhatsApp, Skype, and supplemented through text messaging. Examples of recent Tana assignments that have used this approach include the Understanding Transformative Politics for Inclusive Cities, 2017-2020 (DFID); Development of Settlement Management Guidelines for Mogadishu's Informal Settlements (UNHCR, 2019-2020); and stakeholder surveys for the 2015-2016 Rule of Law Perception Survey (UNDP). Our experience is that these approaches work best where the project team already has a good general contextual knowledge, where the enumerator team is known (or can be trained by a local trainer), and where sufficient resources are set aside to manage the process. Duty of care also needs to be considered in relation to enumerators so that they are not placed in danger. And, similarly, ethical aspects need to be assessed, including issues of gender, religion, clan and interview technique. However, provided that these factors are managed, our experience demonstrates that there is a good basis for undertaking remote working.

Examples of adaptation

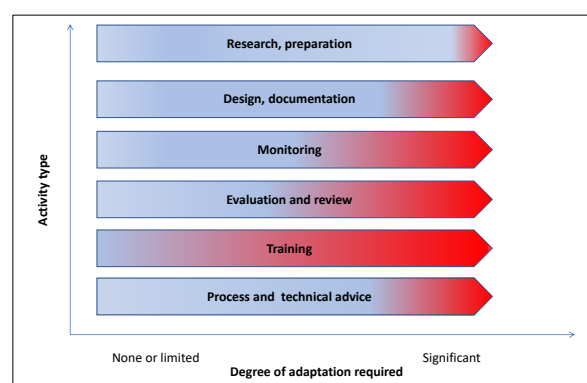
We also find that certain types of task lend themselves more naturally to remote methods than others. Preparatory and analytical work, for example, is often done from the home base anyway with secondary data being gathered from online sources and supplemented by remote interviews, email or even surveys. Where the scope for travel is restricted (such as in conflict affected countries), these remote processes may continue during programme formulation. Likewise, they can be applied during monitoring and evaluation provided that data can be sourced. There may be a need to reduce and focus the scope of the task. But, in many cases, interviews can be conducted remotely.

Our experience is that the most serious challenges are found during implementation of capacity development projects because these typically rely on personal interaction, either within a classroom environment or face-to-face within an advisory setting. Some adaptation will therefore be required. However, while it may not be feasible to gather stakeholders for direct training, current online communications tools (such as Zoom) can enable group distance e-learning. Similarly, Skype,

WhatsApp, and other collaborative platforms can facilitate technical advisory services with regular check-in and consultations.

As illustrated in the diagram below, the effect of travel restrictions and social distancing varies according to project type.

Diagram 1: adaptation according to activity type



What our experience suggests is that adaptation is indeed possible. In the examples below, we illustrate some of the approaches that have been taken and the types of assignment that lend themselves best to

remote working or mixed methods approaches.

- **Research and analysis** assignments typically already comprise a wholly or substantial remote element where desk research is coupled to interviews that are often done remotely using Skype, WhatsApp etc. Examples include context analyses, risk analyses, and thematic analyses where travel has not been considered necessary or appropriate. We have recently undertaken a comparative analysis of European evaluations of counter terrorism programming (2020) on this basis. Similarly, we are developing a conflict analysis of Somalia for inclusion in a forthcoming appraisal of a Good Governance, Water Resource Management and Resource Sharing project (2020). Our experience suggests that, provided sufficient secondary data is available, these types of task can proceed largely unchanged.
- **Programme preparation** typically also includes a substantial mixed methods element. In Afghanistan, our stakeholder consultations for Denmark's 2015-2017 Afghanistan Country Programme were undertaken remotely using video link due to security constraints. The context analysis and analysis of results and lessons from previous support were also entirely desk based. The remotely gathered primary data fed into the analysis and provided validation for the strategic choices proposed. Drafting of the identification report proceeded remotely. In Ethiopia, preparation of Denmark's engagement on resilience (2019) was undertaken remotely in consultation with the World Food Programme. Similarly, the Danish Transition Programme in Palestine (2014) was prepared remotely. And remote assistance is currently being provided to the Danish Representation Office in Ramallah concerning the new Strategic Framework for Palestine (2020).
- **Implementation** can be more problematic due to the role played by training, dialogue and advisory services. But here too there are ways of adapting to remote working. In Ethiopia, our AML/CFT (anti-money laundering) project is continuing in the short term with desk preparations for capacity development activities as well as analytical work relating to development of guidelines etc. While direct training activities have been postponed due to social distancing, the scope for remote training will be considered. The project implementation will follow local authority guidelines on COVID-19.

- **Monitoring** in conflict areas often utilises remote data gathering using mobile and tablet-based platforms such as KoBo (see box 3 below) that combine questionnaires with on-site observations that can be adapted to operate with local enumerators and/or beneficiaries. In less demanding contexts, monitoring is often undertaken remotely anyway on the basis of reporting from implementing partners and interaction over online platforms such as WhatsApp and Skype. Our monitoring assignments for Danida's governance and human rights programmes in Ukraine, Belarus and Kosovo (2016-2019) all adopted a mixed-methods approach with a substantial remote element.
- **Evaluations and reviews.** In Uganda, the 2020 DGF II mid-term review is currently proceeding with the remote involvement of the Team Leader (based in the Netherlands) and two national consultants (on the ground in Uganda). The Team Leader is undertaking remote interviews. All team members are undertaking document review and inception work and the donor group is meeting over Skype. Stakeholders will be interviewed remotely and a survey of implementing partners will be undertaken using survey-monkey (see box 3 below). Analysis and reporting will proceed remotely. In our evaluation of Swedish support to the Cooperation Between Kenya National Bureau of Statistics and Statistics Sweden 2014-2021, a similar approach will be taken. It will use an entirely remote methodology that includes desk review of documentation, remote interviews, and a live participatory group survey.

Adapting to remote working

Remote working is unlikely to be the first choice in every case; direct interaction in the same physical space often remains preferable for interviews and training, for instance. But what the above examples demonstrate is that remote working and mixed-methodologies involving a degree of remote working already form a significant part of the development toolbox and have the potential to be extended.

However, we also find that the ease of adjustment depends upon a number of factors and that, as with many things new, remote working requires a mind-set that is open to new possibilities and ways of working as well as contextual factors that allow it. We have therefore gathered a number of key lessons in box 2 on the next page.

Box 2: Factors helping adaptability

- **Willingness and capacity to adapt.** Building on existing relationships will enhance the ease and willingness to try something new. Additional input may be needed from the client to get the process moving satisfactorily; for example, by “priming” key stakeholders to the intention to proceed with a higher than normal degree of remote interaction.
- **Remote working should be reflected in the scope of the assignment.** The focus of reviews and evaluations may need to change slightly to reflect difficulties in access and ensuring adequate triangulation of evidence. So, it may be more appropriate (and useful) to increase the focus on aspects of implementation such as relevance and lessons learnt rather than impact.
- **Be explicit in explaining how the methodology will deliver the scope of work.** Increase attention on consistency of approach (e.g. through interview guides, notetaking, and virtual team meetings). Greater emphasis on coordination, structure and effective team leadership, division of labour, and dialogue with the client.
- **Be committed to learning and sharing.** It may be a good idea to continuously document lessons learnt around this new way of working and engage in a critical reflection with clients and partners on what is working well to promote joint learning.
- **Availability of local personnel and their ability to move freely.** Our use of remote working in Somalia has been successful because our teams (a) are familiar with the context, (b) have access to trusted local staff, (c) are able to access local enumerators and train them, (d) operate within minimum safety standards.
- **Availability and quality of Internet.** While availability may be less of an issue for many of the stakeholders with whom we interact, its quality may limit the potential for certain communications platforms.
- **Good facilitation.** Our guide to effective facilitation of online meetings provides a host of useful tips to ease meetings and training. It can be accessed [here](#).

Online communications and data collection platforms

We are also conscious that the market for communications and data platforms can seem overwhelming. Some of the most common platforms are described in box 3 below.

Box 3: Online communications and data collection platforms

- **Skype** <https://www.skype.com/da/> Online video conferencing, call and chat platform
- **Skype for Business:** <https://www.skype.com/en/business/> Online video conferencing, call and chat platform
- **WhatsApp** <https://www.whatsapp.com/?lang=da> on-line video, call and chat platform
- **KoBo** <https://www.kobotoolbox.org/> Mobile and tablet based on and off-line data collection, visualization, summarization platform
- **Zoom** <https://zoom.us/>. Internet based video conferencing and meeting spaces
- **Microsoft Teams:** <https://products.office.com/en-us/microsoft-teams/group-chat-software> Comprehensive chat, meeting/conference room, file storing and web-based learning platform
- **Survey Monkey** <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/>. Online survey tool.

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