COVID-19 REMOTE MERL GUIDANCE

UPDATED: MARCH 19, 2020

As program teams limit the frequency, proximity, and quantity of face-to-face MEL activities they must account for new data quality risks associated with remote monitoring. This tipsheet is intended to help MEL teams think through and mitigate the spread and impact of COVID-19 as program approaches adapt to ensure teams have the information they need to continue to improve programming within changing operational contexts. Teams should note that remote MEL provides a partial picture of program progress and efforts should be made to validate findings with multiple sources.

Please note that not all offices, particularly in remote areas will have the connectivity to implement much of this guidance. **If it is not possible to switch to remote non-contact activities, data collection must be suspended**. Contractors, data collection firms etc. must be notified and instructed to halt all interactions with participants.

For any questions or support needs please contact Carly Olenick, MEL Advisor: colenick@mercycorps.org

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COVID 19 Local Context

As a first step, understand the most up to date regulations in your country on COVID-19. Make sure that all team members follow general COVID-19 guidance carefully—including hand washing, equipment cleaning, and proximity to program participants, stakeholders, and other team members. This tipsheet builds off existing guidance and should be used in partnership with it. *This guidance may be updated as new information related to COVID-19 emerges.* You will find centralized information on the Hub's COVID-19 Information Hub. Additionally the WHO has updated guidelines and information in several languages.

Top 4 Actions to Switch to a Remote MERL System

1	Work with the RPT to communicate with your donor on postponing all data collection efforts which require contact with communities (e.g. baseline, endlines, assessments, etc.) Donor language is available if needed.
2	Work with program teams and technical experts to revisit indicators and targets, and make adjustments that take into account program adaptations
3	Review MEL plans and adjust for remote monitoring for critical program activities that will continue
4	In the case of research where teams have sought ethics review, modifications to the study in response to COVID-19 should be submitted to the appropriate contact at review board immediately and prior to implementation. Please be sure to consult with your individual ethics board to verify this process.

MEL & Program Considerations

- **MEL teams should coordinate closely with program teams** as adjustments are made to ensure we are capturing information that informs teams and their decisions (e.g. trigger indicators regarding availability of key food items, fluctuations in exchange rates, etc.) and track progress as much as possible. Teams should also coordinate with finance teams if finance records can be used for activity validation. It is not advisable to continue program activities where monitoring cannot also be conducted.
- **MEL teams should identify which monitoring information is critical** to validate progress, track key context indicators that would trigger programmatic changes, as well as meet donor requirements and decide if monitoring activities can be delayed. If programming is continuing as usual and certain monitoring activities cannot be delayed, teams should explore remote options. (See below for remote monitoring options.)
- **Think about how to use existing monitoring data to alert at-risk participants.** What do you already know about your households that might indicate they have pre-existing health conditions and/or family members within high-risk age brackets (ie. 65+)? Consider working with program teams to identify these groups and reach out to them directly to understand their needs and create separate protocols for recipient households which may already be self-isolating.
- **Ensure all team members handling program data are aware of data protection systems and policies** (e.g. encrypting datasets, proper data sharing procedures, masking personally identifiable

information, not sharing login information, etc.) Review the [Data Protection Tipsheet] for guidance on typical data risks and mitigation activities.

- **Plan regular data review meetings with teams** to discuss challenges, lessons learned, data quality risks, errors, and mitigation strategies. If teams are working from home, meetings can be conducted via phone, Skype, Google hangouts, etc.
  - Have a clear meeting agenda accessible to all parties before the scheduled time
  - Consider using a powerpoint with visual aids to guide the discussion
  - Engage staff in the conversation. Ask for their experience to identify obstacles and potential data quality risks.
  - Take clear notes disseminated to all attendees for their reference and accountability
  - At the end of each meeting identify clear action points and timelines for completion
  - Follow up on these action items at the beginning of each subsequent meeting

Planned MEL Activity	**Alternative Solutions**
Surveys, assessments, key informant interviews, in-depth interviews and other one-on-one interview-based methods	Phone, email, SMS or IVR, and/or other internet-based communications platforms (e.g. Skype, WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Hangouts, etc.)
FGDs or other group discussion-based methods	Internet-based video conferencing platforms (e.g. Skype, WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Hangouts, etc.)
Onsite/context monitoring, observation visits, and other activities (market assessments) requiring physical presence	• Peer monitoring or coordinated program monitoring • Secondary data • Participant or community-based monitoring/feedback via standard CARM feedback channels or phone, email, SMS or interactive voice response (IVR), and/or other internet-based communications platforms (e.g. Skype, WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Hangouts, etc.) to capture audio and/or video data • Use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for in-person visits • Remote sensing and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)
Training, workshops, and other in-person gatherings (e.g. participant or enumerator training, partner workshops, etc.)	Internet-based video conferencing platforms (e.g. Skype, WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Hangouts, etc.)

Data Collection

- **Teams should consider remote options for primary data collection and validation**. Teams may consider phone calls, SMS, IVR, WhatsApp, Skype, Zoom, email, remote sensing, and any other contextually appropriate tools.
  - Teams may consider increasing qualitative data collection and analysis such as key informant interviews or focus group discussions through phone calls, Skype, Zoom, etc.

    - Teams may want to consider expanding their data collection systems to utilize telephone surveys, SMS-based inquiry, or IVR technology which uses a recorded message that instructs listeners on how to respond to questions, either by pressing the keypad or speaking into the phone. These methods should be used to gather information for a small number of short questions, as opposed to complex indicators. These methods are most successful with literate communities where participants are familiar with this survey method.
- Teams should consider inherent bias, limitations, and data quality issues that may occur as a result of using these outreach technologies.
- Ensure phone-based or internet-based survey processes are in place so participants are not charged for airtime or data.
- For teams planning for long-term remote monitoring they may consider using satellite imagery or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) to assess outputs and outcomes (e.g. crop production, new construction, etc.) For guidance regarding analysis and data sources contact **Michael Dawson**, Senior T4D Advisor, at **mdawson@mercycorps.org**.

Phone-based Surveys

- **Obtain informed consent**
- If your team is considering implementing phone-based surveys consider the following to reduce data quality risks:
    - Prioritize “must have” rather than “nice to have” information
    - Use program staff or phone bank operators to conduct the survey in order to avoid issues related to phone provision and management with enumerators.
    - Consider scaling up remote qualitative data collection (eg. phone, WhatsApp, etc.) to delve deeper into key quantitative findings. In this effort, carefully consider sampling strategy to ensure that the follow-up qualitative data broadly reflect the different sub-populations of interest. Likely, those who are vulnerable (e.g. low socio-economic status, living in areas without connectivity etc), will not be able to participate and the absence of their perspectives should be accounted for in future reporting.
    - Simplify surveys to reduce time commitment as participants are more likely to hang up or not complete longer surveys. Research shows that phone surveys should take approximately 15 minutes to ensure meaningful engagement from participants.
        - If teams notice higher than normal drop rates or non-response rates they should identify obstacles and adjust as necessary. For example, if you identify connection or network issues that are resulting in dropped calls or frustrated/confused participants, try calling at different times of the day. If teams note that particular target groups are not responding, identify reasons for this such as time of day, gender of caller, etc. If teams choose to continue with analysis they should account for non-response rate increase and document this trend clearly.
    - Teams should consider and reduce the sensitivity of survey content as participants and surveyors cannot control factors influencing the privacy of the call such as where the respondent takes the call.
    - For Post Distribution Monitoring (PDM), focus on simple key questions that help teams adjust operations (e.g. Are household water needs met? Are individuals able to spend vouchers?)

- At the end of the survey participants should be instructed to wash their hands for 20 seconds with soap and water or an alcohol-based solution if they are using a shared phone. Teams should not encourage participants to use shared phones
- If the donor is not receptive to postponing activities and teams feel they must collect more complex outcome indicators either for an annual survey or evaluation (e.g. to understand dynamics after major contextual shifts or in response to donor requirements) they should devote time to piloting the tool and training staff/phone bank operators in order to catch and mitigate potential issues.
    - Teams should consider inherent bias in results as they will only be able to contact households that have the resources to own a phone and keep it charged. Teams should weigh this bias against the value of this data now. For example, if the target participants are primarily women and we know that women, especially rural women are less likely to have a phone or access to a phone, then teams should consider postponing the exercise as results will not be representative of the target population.
- Touch base with phone bank operators frequently to talk about issues and trends and catch problems early.
- Use digital data collection platforms to gather information about time spent on surveys. This will ensure that the data we collect can be validated and allow managers to track real time for survey completion vs expected time.

Focus Group Discussions for Assessments, Evaluation and Research

Synchronous online focus can be used in place of in person focus group discussions. Skype, Google hangouts, Zoom and Adobe Connect can all support focus group discussions or online training. Please be sure to select a platform that allows for recording for transcription purposes. Please keep in mind the following limitations:

- Participants can have technical problems logging in, which can disrupt the whole group
- Moderators do not have time to probe in the way they do in asynchronous groups. It is difficult to gauge non-verbal responses and participants are likely to have fewer interactions
- Moderators cannot ensure privacy, as they cannot control where the participants will remotely join the discussion and/or who else may be listening and sharing the discussion.
- Most platforms such as ThinkTank specifically designed to support focus group discussions require a membership fee.

Asynchronous Online Focus Groups

- Asynchronous online groups are useful when discussing personal or sensitive subjects. Participants don't see each other and can answer privately just to the moderator. The challenges with asynchronous focus groups is that participants could drop out, misinterpret questions and the moderator does not have any insight into the non-verbal cues.

At the end of the focus group discussion, participants should be instructed to wash their hands for 20 seconds with soap and water or an alcohol-based solution if they are using a shared device.

Online Training and Workshops

- **If it is not possible to conduct a planned training remotely, consider postponing the activity.**

- If there is a possibility of conducting planned training and other workshops online please use a platform that enables you to take a screenshot of the participants (Skype, Zoom, Blackboard) and make sure all participants provide email addresses. Polling functionality within the platform or a complementary polling tool such as polleverywhere or Mentimeter can be used to get feedback on the training and to collect SADD.
    - If participants require materials to participate, consider digital copies, home deliveries, or distribution at a predetermined time and location as appropriate and possible based on local COVID-19 guidelines.
- Remote enumerator training should seek to engage participants, provide examples, and leave time for practice.
    - Platforms such as Zoom allow trainers to break participants up into groups, which can facilitate partner practice exercises.
    - Trainers should allow for plenty of time for piloting phone based tools with target populations that are not within the identified sample list.
    - Trainers should build in time to debrief after each piloting session to talk about trends, obstacles (e.g. translations, wording), and lessons learned.

Onsite Monitoring

- If other Mercy Corps program teams have access to the same locations they may wish to coordinate for simple verification (e.g. new infrastructure builds are present in the correct location) to reduce the number of face-to-face contacts Mercy Corps has with participants. Ensure individuals keep a safe distance (2 meters) during in-person engagements.
- If Mercy Corps has strong ties with other implementing partners in the same operating area, consider peer monitoring to triangulate data. However, teams should only select peers with whom they have strong relationships and trust, as these peers will be representing Mercy Corps and the program to communities and other actors.
    - If program partners engage in data collection it is critical that they use the standard Mercy Corps monitoring forms.
    - Mercy Corps should coordinate with peer organizations to identify opportunities to coordinate data collection that meets common data needs using clearly defined data security standards.
- Use existing relationships with community-based monitors, agents, or leaders. Consider contacting them remotely (e.g. phone, Skype, WhatsApp, etc.) to triangulate trends and issues.
- If you must access a program site, please follow the general, country, and Mercy Corps recommended guidance against transmitting COVID-19, including the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Context Monitoring

- If possible, consider phone-based contact to collect key context information (e.g. price data, environmental monitoring, conflict monitoring, etc.) Teams should gather data from a variety of stakeholders (e.g. vendors, suppliers, consumers) to triangulate data and better understand trends.

Third Party Monitoring

- If your program engages with donor-funded third party monitors, touch base with them to talk about changes and expectations moving forward as well as steps the team is taking to reduce the risk of transmission while maintaining quality monitoring systems. Keeping a close working relationship mitigates any risk of misunderstanding and facilitates shared expectations.
- Teams may not wish to begin enlisting the services of a third party monitor as it is expensive and transfers risk from Mercy Corps employees, but does not reduce risk of transmission for participants.

Baseline, Midline, and Endline Surveys & Final Evaluations

- **If the program is scheduled to complete a grant-required evaluation, the program should coordinate with the RPT to communicate expectations with the donor** and potential options for delaying evaluation timelines.
- **If the program plans to hire a consultant, consider the risks associated with travel disruption and delays**. Consider reducing the scope of the consultancy, for instance by shifting some functions in-house, or changing the consultancy as local or remote.
- **Teams should account for a higher non-response rate when designing a sampling strategy** as there will likely be a higher non-response rate or a higher likelihood of interviewing the incorrect person. Teams may consider the non-response rate observed during the piloting period to inform how they wish to adjust their standard non-response rate figures.
- **Conduct a follow-up call to 5%-10% of participants to verify key information** already collected by phone bank operators. This should be done by a different operator. Major discrepancies should be discussed and addressed.
- **Conduct quality checks on partially submitted data** to identify any major discrepancies. Re-train staff/phone bank operators with discrepancies. Consider pairing a weaker staff member/operator with a stronger staff member/operator, while ensuring they maintain a safe distance (2 meters), if they are working in the same building.
- **Provide clear guidelines for staff/phone bank operators on who is acceptable to interview**. This should be reflected in the informed consent script. Depending on the context the person answering the phone may not be the intended target of the survey. For example, It is clear that we're interviewing the wrong person if a man answers a call meant for a woman, but this would require a bit more screening if a person of the same sex andswers the phone.
- **Teams should continue to confirm** informed consent over the phone. Example text:
  - Hello. My name is **[name]** and I work with Mercy Corps. Mercy Corps is an international non-governmental organization that **[include description of program activities in this area]** in **[state, prefecture, etc.]**. We are conducting **[description of the activity *e.g. a survey of households and have randomly selected yours*]**. The purpose **[include purpose of activity *e.g. of the survey is to learn more about your community so that we can improve our programs in the area*]**. Participation in the survey is voluntary and you are free to decline to answer any or all questions. We will use the information provided to **[how data will be used *e.g used by the research team to help Mercy Corps do better work in this area*]** but will not release your name or any identifying information to anyone. This survey usually takes about **[estimated length of time]** to complete and will not affect your participation in **[other programs/upcoming programs - or it will help determine eligibility into a program]**. If you have any questions, comments or would like us to change or delete any information about you, please contact **[name of point of contact]** at **[phone]**

or **[email]**[1]. Are you willing for us to spend approximately **[estimated length of time]** with you carrying out an interview?

MEL For Partner Projects

- **Work with partners to develop a remote verification plan** that includes the tasks and documentation that will document that each activity occurred to the quality agreed upon by Mercy Corps and the implementing organization. This may include pictures, video, activity reports, receipts, attendance lists, quality checklists, etc. Verification proof should be complementary and provide different details that verify completion/quality (ie. receipts and photos) rather than duplicative (eg. thumb print and registration list). Outline a plan for Mercy corps staff to review the documentation and follow up with the partner for clarification if necessary.
- **Create a plan for regular communication about progress.** This may include reports that can be checked against monitoring data so teams can work together to understand any differences between the monitoring data and report. Consider regular partner reports that include:
    - Narrative of the previous month of implementation and plans for the coming month
    - Finance report (eg. budget vs actual, key transactions, etc.)
    - Indicator Progress Tracking Table (IPTT) or Tola IPTT if partners use Tola
    - Aggregate beneficiary numbers disaggregated by sex, age, and activity
- Teams may also consider remote training options (eg. Skype, Zoom) to address partner capacity gaps or data quality concerns. These activities are most successful if they are designed to be participatory and engaging. If you would like more advice on how to conduct a successful remote training, please reach out to the MEL team.

[1] If phone or email are not used widely in your context, consider a comment box or other specific point of contact