SECURE ACCESS IN VOLATILE ENVIRONMENTS SAVE

Improving the evidence base on delivering aid in highly insecure environments

The Use of Third-Party Monitoring in Insecure Contexts: Lessons From Afghanistan and Somalia

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For more information, visit the SAVE webpage: www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/save

Introduction and Scope

In places where access is constrained due to insecurity, Third Party Monitoring (TPM) has become the method of choice for an increasing number of aid agencies and donors. This means that instead of relying solely on their own staff, agencies and donors use parties that are external to their aid project, their programme's direct beneficiary chain or their management structure in order to assess performance.[1]

While TPM has become the method of choice for many agencies, critics of the approach have expressed significant concerns and emphasise that TPM cannot and must not replace direct field monitoring by an agency's own staff. They argue that TPM alone is not a viable basis for the implementation of projects and that relying on TPM risks undermining access and programming quality.

Given the polarised debate about third-party monitoring, partners of the SAVE project and other stakeholders consulted in Afghanistan suggested that the research team take a closer look at past experiences and existing evidence. Our research thus focused on primary field work in Afghanistan, including qualitative data collected through 16 interviews in Kabul and Jalalabad with agencies relying on TPM and eight interviews with organisations providing TPM services.[2] The team also reviewed the general literature on TPM and remote management,[3] as well as documentation made available by aid agencies.

For agencies working in South Central Somalia, TPM has been the norm for quite some time; it appears to be less controversial in this crisis context. Still, during SAVE workshops in Somalia and during a recent evaluation of DFID's remote-management approach, aid actors consulted did raise questions about the benefits and limitations of TPM.[4] Therefore, this study includes documents on TPM in Somalia in its literature review and tries to highlight similarities and differences between Afghanistan and Somalia.

Our research aimed to contribute to a more structured and evidence-based debate by examining three main questions:

1. What has the experience with TPM in Afghanistan been so far, and what lessons can be drawn?
2. What are the costs, benefits, limitations and downsides of TPM?
3. What is required in order for TPM to provide a meaningful contribution to a broader monitoring and evaluation toolbox?

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[1] Van Wicklin III, Warren A.; Asli Gurkan (2013), "How-to notes: participatory and third party monitoring in World Bank projects - what can non-state actors do?"

[2] All interviews were conducted anonymously. Guidelines used for these interviews can be found in Annex 1; a list of people consulted can be found in Annex 2.

[3] Particularly useful was a recent report by the United Nations Risk Management Unit – Afghanistan (2015) entitled 'Third Party and Collaborative Monitoring: Findings, Opportunities and Recommendations." For Somalia, the RMU-Somalia completed a similar study that was shared with the research team but not publicly available at the time of writing this report: RMU-Somalia (2015), "An Exploratory Study Into the Usage of Third Party Monitoring in Somalia." Other sources considered include A. Donini and D. Maxwell (2013), "From Face-To-Face to Face-To-Screen: Implications of Remote Management for the Effectiveness and Accountability of Humanitarian Action in Insecure Environments"; J. Egeland, A. Harmer and A. Stoddard (2011), "To Stay and Deliver"; B. Norman (2012), "Monitoring and Accountability Practices for Remotely Managed Projects Implemented in Volatile Operating Environments"; WFP (2014), "Third Party Monitoring Guidelines."

[4] Integrity Research & Consulting (2015), "Cross Cutting Evaluation of DFID's Approach to Remote Management in Somalia and North-East Kenya – Evaluation Report."

Third-Party Monitoring in Afghanistan

For seven years running, Afghanistan has seen the highest number of attacks on aid workers.[5] As one consequence of this high threat level, the overwhelming majority of international aid personnel in Afghanistan are based in Kabul. Typically, roughly 90 percent of agency staff are Kabul-based, with one or two international staff based at major regional centres like Herat or Jalalabad.

In order to collect and validate information from the field despite constrained access, agencies have increasingly turned to TPM. Today, it constitutes a sizeable industry in Afghanistan, with an estimated annual volume of around US $200 million.[6] Actors consulted for this study were adamant that the overall demand for TPM is increasing, mainly from selected donors and UN agencies. While no official statistics exist, this trend seems to be confirmed by recent large-scale calls for TPM services by USAID[7] and the World Bank, among others, and the expressed interest of multiple actors in the approach.[8] In a contrast to growing use among selected donors and UN agencies, our research could not find any NGO directly commissioning TPM on a significant scale. This largely reflects the different security requirements and the greater flexibility of NGOs to at least occasionally travel to field sites or to remain present with national staff.

On the "supply side," the field consists of a broad range of actors whose services are used for various purposes. Four main types of suppliers of TPM services can be identified: international for-profit and non-profit organisations, as well as national for-profit and non-profit organisations. However, the distinction between these groups is not clear-cut. Although most agencies have detailed vetting processes in place, including against UN terrorist lists, our research observed some confusion regarding the exact nature of individual TPM providers in practice. This is because some "national" for-profit companies, for instance, are registered as Afghan companies while they are owned by international entities or actors. In addition, the border between national non-profit and for-profit is sometimes fluid and does not always imply a real difference in goals and structure.

In addition, the landscape of small NGOs and for-profit contractors is rapidly evolving because organisations are often being created on an ad-hoc basis to bid on TPM contracts, but do not always have the financial capacities to subsist after the contract ends. In geographic terms, the service network is fragmented and unevenly distributed across the country. This largely reflects the presence of aid agencies. Therefore, on one hand, provinces like Helmand, Kandahar, Farah and certain eastern regions have only a small number of actors that can truly claim to have access. This limits the pool of partners that agencies can draw from, especially in places where they also rely on contracting national partners for the implementation of their programmes. On the other hand, aid hubs in the north and central regions have multiple actors offering monitoring services.

[5] See results of component I of the SAVE research project (forthcoming).
[6] Estimation based on recent public calls for TPM services put out by aid agencies in Afghanistan.
[7] See, for example, https://www.fbo.gov/index?s=opportunity&mode=form&id=9b12fc9a284c23065993f89d65bb2644&tab=core&_cview=1-.
[8] This is also exemplified by a recent workshop on third-party and collaborative monitoring convened by the RMU-Afghanistan in Kabul on April 22, 2015.

Finally, the line between implementing partners and third-party monitoring providers is permeable, as previous studies have already noted.[9] Several national and international actors have added monitoring activities to their traditionally implementation-focused service portfolios.

Table 1: Main organisations providing TPM services in Afghanistan (not a comprehensive list)

International for-profit	**International non-profit**	**National for-profit**	**National non-profit**
IRD, CTG Global, CHECCHI, Altai, Samuel Hall	MADERA	Sayara, ATR Consulting, ASR, RSI Consulting	SDO, AREA, OSDR, YHDO, APA

Third-Party Monitoring in Somalia

For many years, the humanitarian aid presence in South Central Somalia has contracted with the majority of international organisations that run their programmes remotely through partner organisations from their bases in Nairobi, and to a lesser extent from Mogadishu and other humanitarian hubs.

The aid system in Somalia was shaken up by large-scale corruption and diversion scandals during the 2012 famine. As a consequence, donors and implementing partners have become increasingly concerned about accountability and public scrutiny of aid operations. Several UN agencies such as UNHCR, WFP and UNICEF have developed elaborate third-party monitoring systems in recent years.[10] Today, most donors and UN agencies as well as multiple NGOs use TPM in Somalia. But field access remains extremely constrained, and even organisations hired for monitoring rely in part on other parties to do the actual field research. Given this setting, the distance between agencies, their partners and communities is arguably even larger than in Afghanistan, and TPM is often the only channel for collecting and/or verifying data on results.

The vast majority of TPM providers active in Somalia are international companies.

Table 2: Main organisations providing TPM services in Somalia (not a comprehensive list)

International for-profit	**National for-profit**
Altai, Axiom Consulting, Center for Consultancy, Research and Development (CCORD), Coffey International, CTG Global, Forcier Consulting, Galway Development Services International Ltd. (GDSI), Integrity Research and Consultancy, Sahan Research, International Business & Technical Consultants, Inc. (IBTCI), Polaris Global Management, Transtec	SORADI (Somaliland), Alliance for Development Solutions (ADS) (Puntland), Eagle Consulting (Mogadishu), HATI (South Central)

[9] Cf. RMU-Afghanistan (2015): "*Third Party and Collaborative Monitoring: Findings, Opportunities and Recommendations.*"
[10] Risk Management Unit Somalia (2015, draft not publicly available), "An Exploratory Study into the Usage of Third Party Monitoring in Somalia."

Strengths of Third-Party Monitoring

The organisations consulted for this study strongly agreed on the main benefits of TPM. In doing so, they largely confirmed findings from earlier studies[11] and generally agreed with participants of the SAVE workshop.[12] Crucially, TPM allows an agency to keep an information flow to communities open while maintaining a basic level of accountability to its own accountability and results framework and to its donors or constituencies. One UN agency with an interest in scaling up its future use of TPM described how the staff "cannot see themselves" in many parts of Afghanistan and thus depend, among other approaches, on "external eyes and ears" on the ground.

For selected UN agencies, TPM can provide opportunities for gathering data from "no-go" areas, where direct access to the field is not possible for their own staff. This allows for very important triangulation of data received from implementing partners of contractors. Even in areas that agencies could potentially access with their own staff, TPM can provide a low-visibility option with lower risks for communities and monitors, unlike highly visible visits of staff who need to rely on hard protection measures to satisfy security requirements. Donors without direct access to implementation sites can similarly use TPM to monitor the processes and results of activities they are funding.

In addition, TPM organisations are often able to access field locations on a more regular and frequent basis than aid organisations due to the cost and the differences in security arrangements. For some organisations, outsourcing monitoring is more economical than deploying their own staff. This does not take additional oversight costs into account.

While the quality of the data collected and the level of accountability that is achievable through third-party monitors remain disputed (see the next section), it is clear that independent monitors can help validate results and processes.

As shown in the results of an online survey by the SAVE project, satisfaction with implementing partners' M&E systems is generally low among international aid agencies.[13] Against this background, TPM can provide a much-valued option for the verification and triangulation of existing data provided by implementing partners or even own staff. As one interviewee put it, "The turn to TPM came from the recognition of an increasingly difficult security environment with a large portfolio and a weak implementing partner."

Currently, TPM is mainly used to collect quantitative information and verify data. Agencies noted that TPM served as a control mechanism for processes in the field, rather than a means to collect enough data for a proper quality assessment.

TPM was regarded to be most apt for verifying:

- The total quantity of items that has been distributed, e.g., food aid;
- How many people were reached by aid, and who these people were;
- Asset creation and infrastructure development.

In general, the type of data collected by TPM providers is relatively simple, a fact that commissioning organisations attribute to the low analytical and research capacities of many providers and the difficulty of managing more-complex data collection efforts. Despite this

[11] Integrity Research & Consulting (2015); RMU-Somalia (2015); RMU-Afghanistan (2015).
[12] SAVE interim results workshop, Nairobi, August 2015.
[13] This survey was conducted at the beginning of the SAVE research project and covered a broad range of M&E topics, beyond third-party monitoring. A summary of results is available on the SAVE webpage.

general concern, large differences between agencies prevail in practice. While young organisations created just to do TPM will often have limited analytical capacities and experience, others are more experienced in monitoring. Especially in Somalia, providers have been active for some time and have gradually taken on more responsibility for more-complex tasks. Location also plays a role, as aid hubs and regional centres provide a larger pool of skilled monitors than do those in more remote areas. More mature organisations in Somalia, for example, also have capacity development programmes for their staff in place that help to overcome constraints in the medium to longer term.

Against this background, TPM has considerable potential that seems to go underutilised due to the assumption that data on higher levels of results require more elaborate capacities. In Somalia, the DFID evaluation also found that TPM was not being utilised to its full potential, including its potential to strengthen programme implementation. As one agency in Afghanistan noted, if sound indicators are in place, verifying impact does not need to be more complicated than verifying outputs or activities. In the example case of hygiene awareness trainings, one could limit monitoring to whether sessions were conducted as planned (output), or directly pose sample questions to the target group to see whether attendants have internalised the content (outcome) or corresponding diseases have decreased (impact), even though it might be hard to attribute causality. One UN agency using this approach reported interesting findings at the impact level after asking not just whether the outputs were delivered, but also how they affected the lives of communities in that area. Importantly, this approach led to unexpected insights on local tensions and dynamics surrounding implementation that allowed the agency to adjust programming. The limited technical capacities of the third-party monitors were sufficient for this kind of inquiry.

To summarise, the main reported strengths of TPM are:

- Increased monitoring access to insecure areas;
- A low-visibility option of monitoring in areas of limited access;
- More regular and more frequent monitoring than with own staff;
- Independent triangulation of data from partners and own staff.

Constraints and Risks of Third-Party Monitoring

As outlined above, the potential benefits of TPM seemed relatively clear to most agencies consulted for this research. At the same time, the interviews confirmed that current practice is far from being "roses all the way," as one respondent put it. To provide a basis for discussion of how to mitigate potential constraints and risks entailed in the approach, this section reviews the shortcomings and trade-offs that should be considered before and when relying on TPM. Finally, we make tentative recommendations for mitigating constraints.

Quality of Reporting

Based on interviews with aid agencies in Afghanistan, this study found satisfaction with existing capacities for analysis and reporting by TPM providers to be mixed at best. Asked to give a score out of 10 to the credibility and robustness of the monitoring data, most agencies gave a score of between 5 and 7, acknowledging that they were taking into account the low standards of data collection in the country. Agencies reported frequent experiences with irregularities in data collected – for example, data coming from areas where monitors had not been present or data

contradicting the agency's own knowledge and observations. These results confirm the findings of a survey conducted by the RMU.[14]

Written reports produced by monitoring providers were often found to be unsatisfactory, and commenting on and/or refining written documents with external partners proved difficult in multiple instances. Similarly, the quality and precision of statistical analysis were often found lacking. Where monitoring is outsourced, those managing data collection frequently were not familiar enough with the larger project framework, theories of change or the rationale behind certain indicators to detect flaws or collect the most relevant information.

The relatively low level of trust in the data collected by TPM influences how it is then used and integrated into programming. Monitoring information that is critical of performance generally tends to be questioned more rigorously than confirmatory results. With data generated through TPM there is a risk that critical information is dismissed or not taken up by commissioning agencies and implementing partners.

Against this background, agencies consulted have applied different strategies for quality assurance. One actor reported good experiences with hiring a consultant as an intermediary dedicated to checking and cleaning data and managing the data collection process. Others increasingly rely on technology such as GPS-stamped pictures. One agency has developed an elaborate tracking system for its field staff, which can be extended to third-party monitors. Another has GPS trackers installed in the vehicles used by the field teams, to validate movement to agreed-upon field locations. Where technology is not an option due to either a lack of capacity or associated security risks, systematic triangulation with multiple teams is being applied. One agency described how staff from government departments, staff from implementing partners and staff from monitoring partners are all asked to triangulate data and validate who was where.

Reputational Risks

Whereas the quality of results of TPM exercises can limit the benefits and its value for money, the data-gathering process itself and actions taken by monitors in the field can affect the reputation and acceptance of commissioning agencies. All TPM providers consulted were adamant that their staff would only introduce themselves as independent from the agency they were contracted by, but staff from these agencies pointed out that field monitors rarely respected this rule. As one interviewee put it, "We try to make sure that monitors present themselves as separate, but many times in the field, I observed that the field staff uses our name, simply because it is easier for the communities to recognise."

This can entail a serious risk, especially for humanitarian agencies. Interviews conducted with TPM providers revealed a low understanding of humanitarian principles and what these practically mean for the agencies they work with and for their own work. This is true for national and international for-profit monitoring service providers and non-profits and national NGOs in Afghanistan. In Somalia, a similar risk is highly probable in areas where agencies work with field monitors who have not received training in humanitarian principles. Most agencies also acknowledged that equipping monitoring providers with at least a basic understanding of their mandate and key principles was not very high on the list of briefing or training priorities.

[14] United Nations Risk Management Unit – Afghanistan (2015), "Third Party and Collaborative Monitoring: Findings, Opportunities and Recommendations."

As evidenced in Afghanistan and elsewhere, non-state armed groups such as the Taliban frequently justify their distrust of aid organisations with the suspicion that agencies are "spying" or collecting information that can be used against these groups.[15] The consequences can be serious, as demonstrated by the ban on polio vaccinations in the Helmand province in 2014.[16] A recent study based on interviews with members of the Taliban and aid workers concluded that "even routine tasks, such as surveys or gathering information for needs assessments, could be seen as attempts to compile intelligence and could arouse distrust."[17] Hence, the risks that the behaviour of field monitors can entail for the reputation of contracting agencies need to be taken into account, and agencies should work on the assumption that neither armed groups nor affected communities are likely to distinguish between contractors and commissioning agencies.

Noteworthy in this regard is that monitors with greater access in a particular area can be perceived as less impartial and neutral, due to allegiances with dominant groups or individuals in that location. Whereas agencies broadly agreed that using personnel from different regions to allow for an independent and thereby credible assessment is preferable, the principle is challenging to apply in places where outsiders would be viewed with suspicion. A conflict-sensitive approach to monitoring thus calls for a thorough assessment of the access constraints and to whom these apply in a disputed or insecure area. In Somalia, the evaluation of DFID's remote management and TPM experience also found concerns regarding the ethical practices of some TPMs. In response, DFID committed to increasing conflict-sensitivity training of its own staff to better manage TPMs.

Required Investments of Time and Resources

Different estimations by stakeholders consulted for this study and previous studies put the cost of a single monitoring visit by an Afghan field monitor between US $2,000 and $4,000.[18] However, such estimations should be interpreted with caution. The exact cost of TPM depends on the type of project to be monitored and, more significantly, the type of provider selected by the agency, its overhead and salary level. Rather than paying per monitoring activity, agencies using TPM services generally sign framework or flat-rate agreements with monitoring providers that include a range of services such as assessments, liaison, evaluation visits and monitoring. Overall, this study saw a very strong pattern of commissioning organisations initially underestimating the time and resources required.

First, contracting monitors in line with internal procurement regulations typically took agencies between two and four months, in some cases even longer. This time is well invested if it is devoted to a thorough check of references and due diligence, but it means third-party monitoring is no quick fix for a sudden deterioration of access to an implementing area.

A signed contract is often required in order for third-party monitors to start recruiting field monitors, as most TPM providers hire field staff on a project-by-project basis. This process can delay the start of monitoring activities. Where specific skills are required, the search for suitable field personnel can prove especially challenging.

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[15] See A. Jackson (2014), "Negotiating Perceptions: Al-Shabab and Taliban views of aid agencies," HPG Policy Brief.
[16] Reported, for example, in *The Guardian*: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/08/afghan-taliban-bans-polio-vaccination-teams-southern-helmand-province.
[17] See Jackson, "Negotiating Perceptions."
[18] Cf. Schumacher (2013), "Review of Issues for DFID Monitoring in Afghanistan post the 2014 Transition" (unpublished report commissioned by DFID-Afghanistan).

Second, it cannot be readily assumed that adequate training of monitors will be provided by the monitoring organisation alone. Therefore, one commissioning organisation consulted closely involves itself in the process and conducts trainings together with monitoring providers. The organisation's training package includes various components, from techniques of monitoring and vulnerability mapping, to an introduction to the programme's specific modalities, led by programme teams. The training also includes a protection and gender component. Given relatively high turnover, training efforts need to be repeated regularly.

Third, all agencies recognised that they had to invest significant time and resources in triangulating and cross-checking the monitoring data received. Systems to "monitor the monitors" had to be set up in order to use the data with a satisfactory level of confidence. Agencies must then set up their own internal systems to record, process and use the data they receive. It can be challenging to feed data coming from external sources into an agency's existing information management system. In Somalia, the DFID evaluation found that agencies sometimes wanted more data, but had not thought about how to systematically use the additional information to strengthen programming. One agency reported that it took about a year to establish a system robust enough to make sufficient use of the data.

The above investments can provide valuable returns over a longer cooperation with third-party monitors. The costs imply a certain minimal threshold in terms of duration and size of contracts.

Potential Conflicts of Interest and Trade-Offs

Whenever services are outsourced to a third party, the incentive structure changes and can present a conflict of interest. The fragmented and opaque landscape of TPM providers further increases this risk.

Common practices include cross-monitoring between different organisations implementing programmes. In this case, an implementing partner for one activity will be responsible for monitoring the implementation of another implementing partner of the same commissioning agency in charge of another activity, and vice versa. Interviewees expressed concerns that this can lead to organisations being either overly critical of their (actual or potential) competitors or, to the contrary, less critical of peer organisations. This issue was also identified in the Somalia evaluation. Researchers involved in this evaluation pointed out frequent occurrences of violence around contracting.[19] The exact effect could not be assessed empirically in this study, and no first-hand evidence was collected, but consultations with TPM providers in Afghanistan suggest a high level of competition and readiness to point out problems in competing organisations. In other cases, the same organisation is hired for monitoring services and for implementing programmes in different areas. Interviewees also reported conflicts of interest in this arrangement.

A recent study by the RMU-Afghanistan has triggered a debate on the potential for collaboration and information exchange on the use of TPM and individual national and international service providers. A contractor information management system (CIMS) has been put in place to document experiences, and pilots for collaborative monitoring programmes in selected areas are currently being discussed. While it is too early to assess the results of these processes, respondents seem to broadly agree that increased collaboration between commissioning

[19] Integrity Research & Consulting (2015), "Cross Cutting Evaluation of DFID's Approach to Remote Management in Somalia and North-East Kenya – Evaluation Report."

agencies could help mitigate the risk of conflict of interest and improve the overall efficiency and effectiveness of TPM. In practice, however, willingness to exchange information seems to remain limited.

Finally, agencies consulted confirmed a potential trade-off between access and independence. This can play out in two ways. On the one hand, those monitors with the highest level of access to a given area often rely on local networks and are part of the local socio-political context. There are some indications that the more integrated they are, the less likely they are to also report on critical issues concerning corruption or wrongdoing, for fear of negative impacts on their access or personal safety. On the other hand, actors from other regions can act more independently with less concern for local allegiance, but they may not enjoy the same security guarantees and the same level of access.

Fluidity of Access

The level of access is an important criterion in the selection of third-party monitors and one of their assumed comparative advantages. A major lesson that actors consulted shared, however, concerns the fact that the actual level of access is extremely difficult to assess. In the words of an interviewee, "Some of our partners claimed to have access, but then we realised that they were afraid to go to Taliban-controlled areas or ISIS-controlled areas. I can't blame them, but I do have to push for that. It is why we contracted them in the first place."

First of all, with limited own access to the areas in question and only partial knowledge of staffing structures and networks of TPM providers, commissioning agencies had difficulty verifying claims about access. Besides references, the main proxy that commissioning agencies can use is the past experience they may have in a particular province. However, many found that past access is by no means a guarantee for future access in the area, as conditions can change dynamically and from project to project.

Moreover, organisations bidding for monitoring contracts face the incentive to inflate their level of access, and many commissioning agencies found the real level of access to be lower than initially expected.

With regards to the quality of access, it is important to acknowledge that monitoring providers are also not immune to the larger challenges of data collection in Afghanistan and Somalia. A frequently raised example is the inability to send female monitors to collect data in rural areas. Most TPM providers interviewed for this study acknowledged that this was difficult – at times, simply impossible. For example, one provider has been working for four years in the east of the country and receives repeated requests to deploy mixed monitoring teams to improve access to female beneficiaries. But they have zero female monitors and consider it impossible to send female monitors to Kunar or Nuristan, despite the good level of access that the organisation generally has in these highly insecure provinces. In Somalia, the situation is arguably even more dynamic, since conflict frontlines can change rapidly and often. In sum, access is never a guarantee, as whole political structures can shift within weeks.

In conclusion, there is a risk of overestimating the possibilities third-party monitors have based on abstract data requirements, which can put them in a difficult situation and create incentives to inflate capabilities to meet expectations.

Ethical Concerns and Risk Transfer

A transfer of risk from commissioning agencies to monitors is a frequently mentioned, but overall tolerated consequence of third-party monitoring arrangements. In fact, contracting agencies openly acknowledged that this is one of the main reasons they chose to rely on external monitors in the first place. As one interviewee put it, "I think you have to be honest and acknowledge that there is definitely a transfer of risks."

Only one contracting agency consulted has taken this transfer of risks into account in its own procedures and assumed responsibility for the security of monitoring missions. Monitoring plans were shared with the respective focal point and required approval. Security staff and field offices were responsible for security assessments before monitors embarked on their field missions. Finally, the agency shared advice and security information with monitors in a formalised way (other agencies have reported that they share security-relevant information on an ad-hoc, non-formalised basis with their monitors).

More commonly, contracting agencies assume that TPM providers have their own internal procedures and risk mitigation measures in place, and that they require less elaborate systems due to their local networks and community acceptance, as well as their ability to move around using low-profile transportation and protection measures. The latter elements are undoubtedly a real asset for monitoring partners, as they have the ability to contract local staff, and most of them have built networks throughout the years. However, for the vast majority of TPM providers consulted, this study found no evidence that they had robust security procedures in place or any dedicated staff for security management.

This study found that given the budgetary restrictions of many of the national NGOs and companies consulted, they generally do not invest in the kind of fixed costs that full-time security staff would entail. Reportedly, most of their field staff do not receive particular security training. TPM providers noted that at most, they discuss appropriate behaviour and clothing before going to "dangerous areas."

The main security strategies that TPM partners have reported are:

- Relying, to the extent possible, on staff from the area;
- Contacting district and local authorities for updates on the security situation in an area;
- When possible, talking to community elders before going to the field to get information and their protection while in the field;
- Using low-profile transportation means and appearances.

All but one TPM provider interviewed for this study had a serious incident to report: staff being kidnapped (or closely escaping kidnap), staff being killed by landmines en route to monitoring activities and staff receiving threats and warnings of various kinds. One monitor reported that he learned to conceal his identity at Taliban checkpoints. Another expressed how scared he felt to travel by road in the very volatile districts of the Faryab province. These cases show that the general level of acceptance of these risks among professional monitors is relatively high – far beyond the threshold of their contracting agencies. This is confirmed by recent findings from Somalia, where the risks reported by TPM providers have also been substantial.[20]

[20] UN Risk Management Unit Somalia.

This problem of risk transfer is aggravated by the precarious economic conditions many TPM providers and the individuals hired find themselves in, combined with an overall reduction of funding going into Afghanistan. In this highly competitive market, TPM providers have incentives to overestimate and overstate their own capabilities. Interviewees repeatedly pointed out, for example, that organisations were not reporting security incidents and overstated their access to secure contracts. As one interviewee stated, "Wherever there is a project to conduct, we always say yes. We never say 'no, it is too dangerous.' We will always find ways to do it." Agencies need to take responsibility for limiting this risk. As a first step, more exchange is needed on ways to manage and limit the risk transfer – in Afghanistan, Somalia and with experts from other contexts that see similar dynamics.[21]

Potentially Adverse Long-Term Effects of Outsourcing Monitoring

Finally, relying on external organisations for monitoring may be necessary in some areas, but agencies consulted see a clear risk of strong reliance on TPM – especially where TPM providers are used for additional tasks such as assessments or liaison – further undermining their links with communities. A practice that is intended to maintain access and presence in the short to medium term can thus undermine access in the longer run. Some actors also reported a weakening of institutional memory when TPM providers change and/or where they are managed by consultants. Generally, TPM seems most valuable as an (additional) measure of last resort, but its indiscriminate use can distance agencies from those they intend to assist and can thus undermine acceptance. Moreover, the fine-grained information collected in the field is likely to remain outside of the organisation and not be included in written communication from field monitors up the chain. As one agency currently rolling out TPM in Afghanistan noticed, these potentially adverse effects are difficult to avoid once TPM contracts have been developed. Contracts generally cover a number of regions and implementation sites that are not accessible to the agency's own staff. However, even when monitoring becomes possible (again) for own staff in part of the areas covered by a specific TPM contract, it may be easier to leave everything with the TPM provider rather than adjusting TORs, travel- and monitoring plans to account for the new access situation. This dynamic can result is a crowding-out of an agency's own monitoring activities.

[21] Further steps of the SAVE research programme will assess this issue as well as potential mitigation measures in the response to the Syrian crisis.

Case Study: WFP's Experience With TPM in Afghanistan

WFP has collected a wealth of experience with TPM in Afghanistan since early pilots with Programme Assistant Teams (PATs) in 2008. At the peak, in mid-2012, a total of 143 PATs from six different service providers were working for WFP in the field, with a budget of $2.5 million a year.[22] An evaluation from 2012 shows that the learning curve over the past years has been steep: staff turnover was high in high-risk areas, capacity issues were apparent, there were disputes over salary levels, and WFP struggled to recruit female PAT monitors.

As a consequence, WFP made significant investments in the **selection, training and management** of TPM providers that illustrate the high effort required to make TPM work.

WFP uses elaborate benchmarks to select monitoring providers. Field Level Agreements are then signed with TPM providers, which allow them to determine standard salary rates. WFP is also closely involved in the recruitment of field monitors. "When we recruit the PAT monitor, we need WFP staff and sub-office staff to be there in the recruitment office. For the field staff, we need WFP staff to be in the room," a staff member said.

Today, training is also in the hands of WFP, with units on M&E, vulnerability mapping and program-specific topics. The M&E Country Office collaborates with each area office to train all PAT monitors at least once a year.

The overall management of PAT has grown more intense and elaborate in past years. At the area-office level, one person is spending most of his or her time managing daily relations with PATs. Office coordinators and PAT managers meet at the office and talk about the monitoring plan once a month. Every week, updates are received and monthly narrative (qualitative) reports submitted. Additionally, random spot-checks are carried out to confirm that monitors have actually visited sites as agreed upon in sampling tables.

Today, WFP uses 108 PAT monitors from two private consulting firms and two NGOs (Afghan and international) to help monitor programmes in 33 provinces. The illustration of WFP's access in the Central Region (below) shows the extension of access allowed through the use of (national) third parties for WFP, for implementation and monitoring.[23] While some areas remain out of reach (red) and others accessible to WFP staff (green), PATs allow access to a majority of the beige areas.

[22] http://www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-58/humanitarian-negotiations-in-afghanistan-wfps-experience.
[23] District Accessibility for Jalalabad Sub-Office (Jan. 2015), http://geonode.wfp.org/wfpdocs/2908.

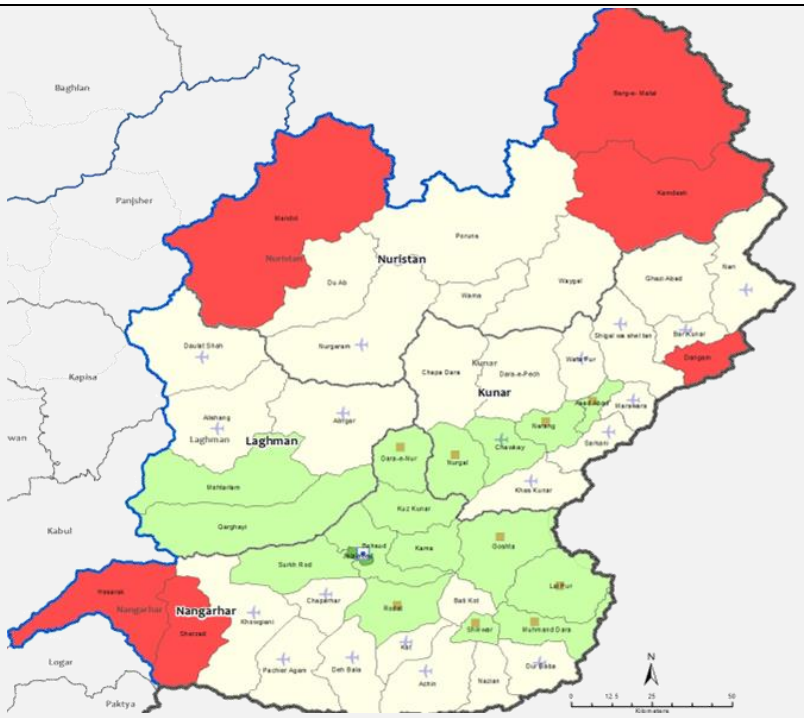

Illustration 1: WFP access map for Central Region in Afghanistan (2015)

So far, PATs have been used for process monitoring of school feeding programmes, asset creation and food for training activities. Yet the limits and challenges seem to be clear: "When it becomes too technical, we tend to not only depend on PATs. While we can send them to monitor the food distribution and implementation (outputs), we are less likely to ask them to assess technical quality," said one staff member. Moreover, turnover at the field level is still high, and training needs to be repeated frequently to compensate for "brain drain" resulting from monitors finding jobs with the government or other agencies.[24] Finally, finding senior female monitors is still proving to be a challenge. It is difficult to find senior field monitors to enter clinics to interview mothers or to enter female vocational training centres where men cannot go. To address this challenge, WFP has started to allow female monitors to move with their *mahram* (male relatives).

Overall, WFP is satisfied with its PAT system. But despite the substantial investments and the considerable learning that has taken place since 2008, challenges remain to be overcome and continue to demand significant investments.

[24] While this requires additional investments from the agencies' point of view, local capacity is arguably being developed in the process and is likely to have a positive overall impact.

Requirements for Successful TPM and Recommendations

Considering the benefits and shortcomings outlined above, TPM can provide a meaningful contribution to the broader monitoring and evaluation toolbox when the following requirements are met:

- ✓ The commissioning agency has the capacity to adequately vet, select, train and manage TPM providers to ensure quality and a productive long-term working relationship (including required financial and human resources). This should include elements of capacity development whenever feasible.
- ✓ The market for TPM providers is sufficiently large in the country, allowing for competitive bidding and avoiding conflicts of interest of monitoring providers. Where the market is not present, capacity building of suitable organisations is ever more important and can prepare the ground for TPM in the medium term.
- ✓ There is a clear understanding of the risks TPM can entail for the commissioning agency's work and perception, including a possible deterioration of access and acceptance in the long run.
- ✓ There is a clear understanding of the risks TPM can entail for the monitors themselves, as well as for affected communities where monitors unintentionally interfere in or influence local conflict dynamics.
- ✓ Primary reliance on monitoring by third parties is limited to exceptional areas with constrained access and not expanded to an across-the-board outsourcing of monitoring activities. At least partial field monitoring by own staff and/or implementing partners is conducted in parallel to assess the reliability of and validate data received by third parties. Where this is not possible, no amount of additional data will really improve programming decisions.

These requirements are necessary, but not sufficient for the successful use of TPM. Commissioning agencies should thus take the following additional recommendations into account to mitigate the potential negative effects and shortcomings of TPM.

1. Anticipate the need for time and resources to manage TPM providers.

Considerable investments need to be made in the selection, training and management of monitoring partners. Selection of field monitors can be done jointly with TPM teams. This allows for the development of trust and ensures adequate consideration of quality vis-à-vis cost considerations. The work of field monitors is what defines TPM: their conduct is critical for the success of a monitoring mission and for outside perception during any monitoring exercise. Time spent on the adequate selection and training of monitors is thus well invested.

Training is important to ensure not only a minimum level of technical and monitoring skills, but also an understanding of humanitarian principles and conflict-sensitive field research. Promising approaches are being discussed in Afghanistan to standardise and centralise training of monitors, gradually building a pool of skilled monitors that agencies and TPM providers can draw on.[25]

[25] Discussion with RMU-Afghanistan.

Once partners have been deployed to the field, frequent data checks should be planned to avoid finding out too late about irregularities and gaps in collected data.

Management of monitoring partners should be done as close to the field as possible, e.g., enable provincial or field offices to manage monitoring teams in their region. This is difficult and may not be possible for donor agencies with limited field presence. A number of aid agencies, however, can work towards empowering provincial and national staff where international access is limited beyond headquarters. While the exact reporting and communication structure needs to be tailored to the specific context, personal exchange and oral debriefings should be emphasised, as they can balance the often subpar quality of written reports and add valuable nuances. Whenever possible, mixed teams and jointly planned monitoring missions can be conducted.

In addition to the relationship between TPM and commissioning agency, the relationship between TPM and implementing partners requires investments and trust building. Where the use of TPM is not explained and communicated in a transparent way throughout the cooperation, implementing partners tend to see TPM as "policing" their work, which in turn compromises their willingness to share information.

Internally, commissioning agencies need to develop systems for using the data collected and feeding relevant information to those in charge of adapting and refining programme design. When an agency rolls out the use of TPM, large amounts of data are generated. Data that would otherwise be collected on a more continuous basis by field staff accrues in large waves and often ends up on the desk of only one or two responsible individuals. The volume of data collected can overwhelm existing structures and agencies reported that significant adjustments to information management systems were required to make sure externally gathered monitoring data can be absorbed, interpreted and retained in the agency.

2. ***Adjust due diligence for humanitarian and conflict settings.***

The findings of this study confirm the conclusion of the RMU report (2015) that a more formalised information-sharing system between agencies would help them to avoid choosing contracting providers that have performed poorly in the past.

In addition to formal and capacity considerations, agencies selecting providers should pay due attention to the TPM provider's reputation, apolitical nature and respect for key humanitarian principles. Experience with conflict-sensitive approaches and field research should be required from all candidates. Where this is lacking, capacity development should take place to foster conflict-sensitive approaches. Importantly, the skills should also be strengthened within commissioning agencies, so joint trainings could be considered.

3. ***Further develop the use of technological devices to increase control over field monitoring.***

The few agencies relying on GPS to track teams in the field were satisfied with the level of confidence it gave them in the data. Using GPS-stamped pictures of the field enumerators themselves on the site requires neither a highly sophisticated nor expensive system and has proven quite effective for the organisations using them. However, it is important to note that the

use of technology to verify data also entails risks in many conflict contexts.[26] Generally, low-visibility gadgets should be used (e.g., simple smartphones instead of GPS and cameras). The use of technology should be openly discussed with field monitors, who often know most about the acceptance of specific tools in a given context, as well as potential bans on technologies by armed groups. Clearly communicating the need to validate data collection with the help of technological aids provides an opportunity to ensure that functions are well understood by field staff. It can also have a preventive effect, e.g., when field monitors know about GPS stamps of survey responses.

4. Strengthen security protocols and duty of care.

While TPM providers need flexibility to move around in the field without overly stringent security regulations, there is considerable room for improvement in the application of duty of care by contracting agencies. For example, some monitoring providers could get access to the security information available to contracting agencies. Where this is unfeasible and information cannot be shared, security advice based on confident analysis should be shared ahead of monitoring missions. Joint security analysis or sharing of analysis can increase understanding of risks and of risk mitigation strategies by both parties.

As a selection criterion, TPM providers should be expected to provide adequate insurance for field monitors, including life insurance. Insurance fees should be included in TPM contracts and covered by commissioning agencies.

Finally, TPM providers should be incentivised to develop a solid internal security architecture and required to fully disclose security incidents with their contracting agencies. This can be achieved by including security standards in the due diligence when choosing TPM providers, ideally after communicating these requirements transparently in calls. In addition, ongoing support and capacity development should be considered for providers that pass this threshold.

5. Keep expectations and plans modest.

The overestimation of actual access and capacity to collect required data has led to frustration in many cases. Therefore, it is important to anticipate constraints early on and develop parsimonious frameworks for data collection. Focusing on a few key indicators or geographic areas and ensuring data is valid can prove more effective than asking for too much, only to then find expectations remain unmet. Importantly, the complexity of data collection does not necessarily depend on the results level on which data is required (e.g., output, outcome, impact); thus, focusing on a few key impact indicators can be more useful than verifying multiple inputs and outputs.

6. Keep developing acceptance to switch back to internal monitoring.

Agencies should undertake all possible measures to avoid a reduction or crowding out of communication between themselves and key informants from communities. To this end, third-party monitoring should always be flanked by acceptance-building measures and community feedback systems, as well as overall transparent communication with communities

[26] A separate, forthcoming SAVE publication (working title: "Menu of Technologies for Monitoring in Insecure Settings") provides a more detailed assessment of the risks and benefits of different technologies.

(beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries). Whenever possible, agencies should continue own monitoring activities alongside TPM contracts. In fact, a conscious overlap can be helpful, i.e. continuing own monitoring in areas that are included in TPM contracts or vice versa including areas accessible to own staff in TPM contracts. This can allow validating the work of the TPM provider and direct exchange in the field. It can also help avoid a dynamic in which all monitoring is (continued to be) delegated to TPM providers even though access changes, simply because there is no own monitoring capacity left in place.

7. Regularly reassess TPM and its alternatives.

Finally, the practice of TPM needs to be regularly reassessed and options for internalising monitoring regularly re-evaluated. Primary reliance on third-party monitoring should thus be limited to exceptional situations.

Annex 1: Interview Guidelines

THEME	Questions
Mapping	1. Why have you started working with TPMs? What is the purpose of TPM? 2. Please list the TPM providers you are working with or you have worked with over the past five years, indicating for which programme, in which area and for what purpose for each of them. 3. We would like to take precise examples of your agency's experience with TPM. Can you share: a. One example that you considered to be a (relatively) successful experience? b. One that you considered to be a (relatively) unsuccessful experience? c. What explains these different outcomes, in your opinion?
Relationship between agency and TPM	4. How long have you been working with this partner? 5. What is its exact scope of responsibilities? 6. How many TPM staff are dedicated to your programme? 7. Who is in charge of managing that relationship within your agency?
Budget	8. What is the absolute cost of relying on TPM? 9. What share of the programme budget? 10. Can you estimate the number of man-days dedicated by your agency to the selection and training of TPM? 11. Can you estimate the number of man-days dedicated by your agency to the management of TPM, once selected? 12. Are TPM staff using some of the agency's resources to do their work: desk, transportation means, material (computers, phone, etc.)? 13. Have you noticed significant differences in costs depending on the nature of the TPM provider (NNGO, INGO, Afghan private company, etc.)? Do you have examples?
Contracting & assessment	14. Is there a vetting system for TPM (details/examples)? 15. How do you assess the level of access that TPM providers have? 16. How do you assess their staff's technical capacities? 17. How do you assess their reporting capacities? 18. Is there a restitution clause in the contract with TPM in case of under-performance?
Training of TPM	19. Who is in charge of training TPM providers and field monitors? 20. What type of training (length, frequency, content)? a. Are there components of the training that focus on humanitarian principles? b. How are monitors supposed to introduce themselves in the field? In insecure areas in particular?
Monitoring by TPM	21. Who is in charge of developing logframes and monitoring frameworks? At what stage of the project cycle do TPMs typically come in? 22. What type of data are TPM providers supposed to collect for monitoring? a. Quantitative? b. Qualitative? c. Socioeconomic indicators? d. Feedback and complaints from beneficiaries?

	e. What level of results is data collected on (outputs, outcomes, impacts)? 23. What tools are used for data collection? a. Standardised formats? → Can you share these? b. Use of ICT (GPS, stamped pictures, etc.)? 24. How often do monitors visit each site per project? 25. Who is in charge of processing the data? 26. How is the data used by your agency? Examples? 27. Who is in charge of data analysis and reporting?
Quality of monitoring	28. How do you judge the quality of the monitoring process conducted by the TPM? 29. How do you judge the quality of the data provided by TPM? 30. How would you rate the credibility of the data you get, on a scale from 1 to 10 (10 = completely trustworthy)? 31. Does your agency have means for triangulating and checking the monitoring data provided by the TPM? a. How? b. How systematically is the data triangulated and verified? 32. What other monitoring mechanisms do you rely on?
Independence vs. access	33. Have you identified conflicts of interest (e.g., TPM implementing and monitoring activities)? 34. Do you think the access of the TPM staff to certain areas means a lesser degree of independence? a. Do you have examples (if possible, documented) of when this was a problem? b. Do you have examples of when TPMs were able to identify some issues of aid diversion, gatekeepers and beneficiary selection in the field? 35. Do you have documented examples of fraud, misleading information, etc., from one of your TPM providers?
Risk transfer	36. Do you consider that there could be a transfer of risks from your agency to the TPM? 37. What mitigation measures are in place to limit that risk? 38. Have there been any security incidents? Please provide examples.
General assessment of the TPM system	39. What are the biggest benefits of TPM for your agency? 40. What are the drawbacks of working with TPM? 41. If you look at the total number of TPM monitoring experiences, how would you rate their usefulness (1–10)? 42. Is reliance on TPM increasing or decreasing? 43. For which types of programmes do you think TPM works best/worst? 44. Which type of TPM providers do you find best suited to conduct robust monitoring (international companies, Afghan companies, Afghan NGOs, INGOs)?
Further contacts	45. Who else should I talk to in your agency? 46. Other organisations I should talk to? 47. Can you share the contact information of TPM providers you have worked with?

Annex 2: List of People Consulted in Afghanistan

First name	Surname	Job title	Organisation
Justine	Piquemal	Director	ACBAR
Khalid	Yari	Education Programme	UNICEF
Chandra	Sekhar	Planning and Monitoring Specialist	UNICEF
Ariel	Higgins-Steele	Knowledge Management Specialist	UNICEF
Utomo	Tjipto	Head of M&E	WFP
Yuni	Handayan	Head of Programmes	UNHCR
Ditte	Fallesen	ARTF Coordinator	World Bank
Milka	Verastegui	Head of Compliance Unit	UN WFP
Franziska	Kohler	Deputy Team Leader - Joint Programme Results Group	DFID
Hélène	Vidon	Country Director	MADERA
Eng. Arifullah	Azimi	Managing Director	AREA
Sarwar	Hemat	Programme Coordinator	AREA
Dr. Omar	Jamshid	Manager	SDO
Mohammad	Tamim	WFP Field Coordinator	WFP
Ghulam	Rasool	Deputy Director	OSDR
Ahmad Rashid	Watanpahl	Programme Analyst	UNDP
Kiye	Mwakawago	Operation Manager APRP	UNDP
Rodrigo	Serquira	Programme Manager	UNFPA
Fazal	Monib	Programme Assistant	UN Women
Paddy	Smith	Team Leader - ARTF Monitoring	IRD
Sultan	Mohamed	Regional Manager	AREA
Mohammad	Eamal	Senior Programme Associate	UNHCR
Mohammad	Nasir Attai	Head of Sub Office	WFP