

COVID-19 CRISIS: HOW TO ADAPT YOUR DATA COLLECTION FOR MONITORING AND ACCOUNTABILITY?

Version 1 - 7 April 2020



This note is produced in the framework of the "Strengthening CSOs' Program Data Management" project co-financed by the French Development Agency¹.

CartONG has adapted its activities and support to the national and international solidarity sector to the Covid 19 crisis. This note aims to answer the questions raised by several of our NGO partners in the recent days.

CartONG remains attentive to the needs of the actors of the sector, **so do not hesitate to contact us at partnerships@cartong.org** if you need information management support in this context or if you wish to give us feedback on this note.

I. Summary of generic recommendations applicable to data collection and management in the context of the Covid-19 crisis.....	2
II. Remote Alternatives to Survey-type Data Collection	5
I. Summary of solutions and glossary	5
II. Prerequisites and Implications	6
II.1. Administration by interviewer	8
II.1.A. Telephone interview	8
II.1.B. CATI - computer-assisted telephone interviewing	9
II.2. Self-administration.....	9
II.2.A. SMS Survey	10
II.2.B. Survey by USSD.....	11
II.2.C. Smartphone web survey	12
II.2.D. Interactive Voice Response (IVR)	13
III. Remote Alternatives to Accountability Mechanisms	14
III.1. Possible alternatives.....	14
III.2. Good practices and lessons learned	16
IV. Data protection issues	17

Document released under the Creative Commons CC-BY 4.0 license.

The icons used in this document were created by Iconathon, Icon Master and Justin Blake of the Noun Project.

¹ This document is supported by the French Development Agency. Nevertheless, the ideas and opinions presented in this document do not necessarily represent those of AFD.

While humanitarian and development programs need to adapt to the epidemic by integrating the constraints of social distancing (limiting the frequency, proximity and quantity of "face-to-face" activities), the same applies to Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and accountability mechanisms. This note is intended for **headquarters and field teams in charge of M&E** and aims to help them **adapt**² by summarizing the possible technological alternatives³ concerning :

- **data collection** mechanisms
- **Ways information is exchanged with communities**
- **Related data protection** issues

I. Summary of generic recommendations applicable to data collection and management in the context of the Covid-19 crisis

In the context of Covid-19 most actors currently recommend to:

- Limit as much as possible (or even stop entirely) face-to-face data collection (such as paper or mobile surveys, focus group discussions, etc.) and prioritize (or even mandatorily use) **"remote" data collection mechanisms** to limit the frequency and number of contacts between individuals. 
- Limit data collection to **essential and critical data** for project implementation and context monitoring; and postpone non-imperative data collections to later.
- Identify the level of risk for teams and communities and stop all **"risky" data collections** (or equip personnel with the necessary protective equipment) such as the collection of biometric data⁴ (which by its very nature can facilitate the transmission of Covid-19) or data collections resulting in the gathering of too many people.
- Make maximum use of **secondary data**. The current crisis is generating a large amount of data: consider using publicly available data (see for example the [HDX](#) platform) at least for context monitoring. This limitation of primary data collection can also be an opportunity to explore your old data that you may not have had time to analyze completely yet ;)
- **Share your data as much as possible**: it is crucial - even more than usual - to limit unnecessary data collections if this data already exists and can be found. Try sharing as much as possible your shareable data (with your partners, clusters, open data platforms such as HDX, etc.), even if you doubt their quality - in the context of a crisis, data is often of imperfect quality due to the difficult data collection conditions.



- Integrate the **data protection** component into your new tools (consent, security, etc.) especially - and above all - if you have lists of people identified as infected (significant risk of stigmatization). If you anticipate having to refer cases to another actor, think about planning sooner rather

² This note therefore focuses on the **adaptation of current programmes** and does not address the question of specific technological devices to be put in place in response to the epidemic, such as devices dedicated to health centres or medical workers, tools for mass awareness or information sharing, care or follow-up/tracking of contaminated persons, etc.

³ The recommendations below are mainly drawn from the existing literature on the subject, and are intended to be as generic as possible. They must therefore naturally be adapted to each organizational, operational and cultural context. The proposals for technological solutions mentioned are not intended to be exhaustive and are provided as indicative examples only. If all the solutions mentioned have been used for several years by some actors, they have not necessarily been tested or analysed in detail by CartONG. Finally, it should be noted that, in the current crisis, some organisations are offering their services for free, such as [Nafundi on ODK](#), and that several solution providers are offering accessibility to their service for free or at reduced rates, such as [SurveyCTO](#), [CommCare](#), [OpenFN](#), [Ushuaidi](#), etc.

⁴ See in particular WFP's recommendation on this subject <https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/documents/wfp-guidance-for-cash-based-transfers-in-the-context-of-the-covid-19-outbreak1.pdf>.

than later a "data sharing agreement" so that these are in line with your organization's procedures. See Part IV.

→ Review **data collection strategies**:

- ⇒ Potentially **limit quantitative surveys** (more complex to implement at a distance and potentially a source of many biases - see Part II) in **favour of more qualitative approaches** (such as semi-structured telephone interviews for example).
- ⇒ Review **your sampling strategies** to possibly target a smaller number of individuals, for example using sentinel households or "snowball" sampling rather than representative probability random sampling as originally envisaged,
- ⇒ Also review **the very relevance of conducting certain data collections such** as baseline or endline surveys in the context of the current crisis. The latter, as an exceptional event, could impact the results and make the study incomparable with a "normal" period,
- ⇒ Think about **using alternative means**, when possible and relevant, such as satellite or drone images or remote sensors (for example to measure the quantity of water distributed).

→ **Coordinate your efforts.** Some States or organizations (such as national Red Crosses, NGO consortia...) are setting up communication mechanisms that can be aimed at certain actors or communities (hotlines, SMS sending...). Make sure you know these and coordinate on the topic so as not to duplicate them, to avoid misunderstandings, doubts for the communities or them also having more information than they need.

→ The health crisis can affect everyone, and in this sense, it is important that your procedures **apply to all your partners**: organizations in charge of "third party monitoring", local partners, etc. Stay attentive to the feedback and possible fears expressed by the latter and accompany them in the changes.



See also



Humanitarian Data Solution's blog post translated by CartONG
<https://www.humanitariandatasolutions.com/pandemic/>

The compilation of resources by the European Evaluation Society:
<https://www.europeanevaluation.org/evaluation-times-covid19>

Get ready (for those who still have time to do so)

01. Most alternatives to face-to-face data collection require the use of telephone services or even the Internet:

- So think about - quickly - **collecting the telephone numbers of** key actors in your area of intervention (local authorities, community relays...) and of individuals or groups benefiting from your projects, if relevant. Many people use more than one SIM card, think about collecting these different numbers, if relevant.

NB: Please **review the various consent messages used in your data collections now to ensure that** you can legally retain, use and possibly share these numbers. It is important to specify the purposes for which you plan to use these numbers (only for your current projects and/or those that would be implemented later in preparation for or in response to Covid-19). If you plan to share these numbers with other sectors, the consent should be specific and granular (and allow your contact person to refuse one or more types of sharing while accepting that your organization may use it). [See Part IV](#)

- In very vulnerable communities without phones, consider **distributing basic phones as well as** SIM cards (many countries require the presentation of ID to obtain a SIM card - anticipate this step if your country is concerned).
- Using the telephone, SMS or the Internet will probably require your future interlocutor to use his communication credit and his battery. Think now about **the means to reimburse your interlocutors** (credit distribution, reimbursement by mobile payment...) and identify, if necessary, how they will be able to **recharge their phone**.

NB: For areas with no telephone coverage, no easy "remote" collection alternatives have been identified (apart from possible traditional satellite phones, community radio systems, etc.) and data collection will potentially have to be suspended depending on your organization's procedures- or at least minimized to the maximum.

02. The introduction of new communication mechanisms (and therefore technologies) is generally strongly discouraged in a crisis situation, as you will probably not have the time to identify your needs, train your teams and raise community awareness. Nevertheless, you may not have the choice to make the transition to technologies that are - for your organization and the beneficiary communities - still unknown to you. It therefore requires :

- to identify as soon as possible the alternative you are going to use in order to anticipate **its cost** (most solutions are not free or easily accessible as can be the case with KoboToolBox for example), to **proceed with its purchase** (identification of the supplier, drafting of the contract, etc.),
- write **procedures** for the use of these new tools and **train your teams**,
- **raise awareness as much as possible** amongst communities and your future interlocutors who may not have confidence in these new mechanisms. If possible, begin to introduce the use of the telephone in a gradual way, using individual and explanatory telephone calls as soon as possible to build trust.

03. Also anticipate that your data collection and community exchange exercises will also be an opportunity to discuss questions from your interlocutors in the context of this crisis and that it is your responsibility to answer them. Therefore, make sure that the concerned teams have **all the answers to the most frequently asked questions**. This includes, for example, identifying the nearest medical center to which to refer suspicious cases, or providing an identical answer from one team to the other as to the expected date when the activities will restart. Similarly, these exercises are likely to be an opportunity to raise awareness on the epidemic, so keep in mind to include important messages regarding hygiene practices, prevention, etc.

04. Finally, be prepared to accommodate new data sources (e.g. SMS, but also potentially other activities that can be dematerialized, such as cash transfers) in your current information systems, which may not necessarily be structured according to your usual data sources. Anticipate as much as possible **interoperability** issues between your current systems and those that will be implemented (export format, automation of transfers via API, etc.).

II. Remote Alternatives to Survey-type Data Collection

I. Summary of solutions and glossary

Even if the face-to-face interaction of a regular survey cannot be completely replaced, the use of one of the following communication methods makes it possible to overcome an information deficit or to triangulate information received:

Administration of the questionnaire by the interviewer	Phone	The interviewer asks the questions over the phone and records the answers on the same medium as before (paper, smartphone, etc.) or an interface adapted to a computer (web interface, Excel spreadsheet, etc.).
	CATI	<i>Computer Assisted Telephone Interview</i> The interviewer asks the questions over the telephone and records the answers directly on a software (computer). The software takes care of call management.
Self-administration of the questionnaire	SMS	<i>Short Message Service</i> The questions are sent by SMS and the answers are also sent back by SMS by the respondent. The questions can be simple or structured according to the answers. The survey is usually automated via specific software managed by a web platform.
	USSD	<i>Unstructured Supplementary Service Data / supplementary service for unstructured data</i> Questions are sent via USSD (faster alternative to SMS) and answers are recorded in real time on the web platform.
	Mobile Web	The organization sends a web link to all respondents. Respondents complete the questionnaire directly via their smartphone.
	SVI/IVR	<i>Interactive voice response / interactive voice server</i> The survey is conducted via a telephone call, using pre-recorded voice messages. Respondents use the keys on the telephone to answer as the survey proceeds.

Telephone and virus transmission

It is essential to understand and make people understand that the mobile phone, in itself, can be a vector for the transmission of the virus. Therefore communicate to your teams and communities about the importance of cleaning and - if possible - avoiding sharing the mobile phones.

Glossary

USSD: Real-time or instant messaging type mobile phone service, without the possibility of saving or forwarding messages (unlike the characteristics of "normal" SMS messages). Interactive USSDs are message exchange sessions, in a global time frame defined in advance by the mobile network operator (negotiable). It is the exchange session that will be billed, not each message sent (as is the case for SMS).

For some of these alternatives (see below), you may also need to solicit and contract with one or more MNOs and/or a mobile aggregator. Here is the difference between these two types of organizations:

Mobile Network Operator (MNO): Organization providing telecommunication services. For example: Orange or MTN.

Mobile Aggregator: An organization that incorporates multiple mobile network operators and provides "unified" access to the different communication services of the mobile network operators (MNOs) through their aggregation application. Note that there are different types of aggregators (API aggregator, money transfer aggregator...) and that some are country specific, especially for USSDs. The most common are [Twilio](#), [Vonage](#) - formerly Nexmo and Tokbox, [Clickatell](#), [Cellulant](#), [InfoBip](#), [Africa's Talking](#), [Synq Africa](#).

Check out the DIAL Manuals



This short document simply explains the technical differences between mobile services (SMS USSD & IVR): [DIAL Mobile Capability Model](#)

This short document explains the value and how to use an aggregator instead of an MNO: [A Guide To Using Mobile Aggregators To Deliver NGO Services At National Scale](#).

II. Prerequisites and Implications

For all the identified alternatives, it is essential that the population has, at the very least, **access to a telephone service**, which can therefore be a hindrance in certain contexts. The respondent must have access to a mobile phone and be able to use it. For some of these alternatives, access to the **Internet** is also essential.

This introduces significant and difficult to circumvent **biases** in the profiles of survey respondents, which require that the results be analyzed with a certain degree of reservation (it is imperative to document the identified biases).

1. The **penetration of mobile phones** is not homogeneous in all territories, for various reasons (network coverage, population density, culture, etc.).
2. In many countries, telephone owners are proportionally more likely to be young men. It may therefore be difficult to access certain audiences (depending on **gender and age**).
3. Having a phone (and being able to charge it) or not impacts the representativeness of the results in **terms of vulnerability**. The phone model also plays a role: between a mobile phone and a smartphone, the profile of the owner will not be the same.
4. There is an inherent bias in technology. Some communities may have a **negative perception** of them (e.g., lack of trust, seen as tools for spying, etc.). In some cases it might be necessary to work on such negative perceptions with the communities prior to the data collection.
5. Finally, in relation to the previous points and because some alternatives based are on written exchanges, the bias of **illiteracy** may appear.



To go further:

[COVID-19: How to include marginalized and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement](#), Reliefweb

[Countries with lower literacy levels need different COVID-19 communication strategies](#), Translators Without Borders

Moreover, adapting one's collection to these alternatives implies:



→ To review the **content of surveys** using new modalities: shortening the questionnaire (15-20 minutes on the phone seems to be a maximum), prioritization and simplification of questions, possible reformulation of open-ended questions into simpler or multiple-choice questions (for SMS or IVR), impossibility of collecting certain data such as observations (cleanliness of a latrine for example) or questions too sensitive to be asked over the phone, etc. It is therefore essential to think about the indicators that one is seeking to analyze, to prioritize them, and to revise the questionnaire accordingly. The **test** phase of the said questionnaire becomes even more important.

→ Another fundamental technical aspect is the **translation(s)** of the questionnaire which must be carried out prior to the data collection for SMS and IVR surveys. It is also necessary to ensure that the interviewers/administrators are fluent in the local language, in order to respond to any remarks.

→ A higher non-response rate should be incorporated when designing the sampling design, it is likely that the non-response rate will increase when using a telephone rather than face-to-face data collection (due to dead batteries, network outage, unwillingness to answer etc.). More generally, the non-response or refusal rate is an important point to monitor in order to assess the adjustment of the data collection.



→ **Human resources** are also to be considered: does the data collection tool involve recruiting interviewers? Does the process need to be automated (software, voice message) and therefore require specialized data management profiles? And if so, are such profiles available? Even if surveys are conducted by telephone, it is essential that **trust** can be established between the respondent and the interviewer (gender, age and language criteria are crucial).

→ Using **new tools** means thinking about budget, which is not necessarily negligible. Do the surveyed populations have telephones? Should phones/SIM cards be distributed? How should respondents be compensated (phone credit/SIM cards)? What is the most appropriate technological solution (depending on its business model: in terms of phone credit, number of messages sent)? Does the organization have the **budget to** meet these expenses?



To go further :

Guide to budgeting p.19 (Use of new technologies for M&E in volatile environments - GPPI): [Technologies for monitoring in insecure environments](#).

II.1. Administration by interviewer

II.1.A. Telephone interview

Telephone interviewing is suitable for surveys that have been previously carried out on paper or on a mobile device (Mobile Data Collection - MDC) and where the automation of call management is not essential (low volume of people to call).

Respondents	Organization
+ Respondents do not need to be literate	+ Survey preparation is quick (questions need to be prioritized)
+ Respondents simply need a "basic" mobile phone... 	+ There is switching in-between tools (simple switch to web version)
+ Respondents don't need the Internet	+ There is no additional cost (beyond the phone packages)
+ There are no financial costs for respondents.	- Data collection is lengthy (one respondent per interviewer at a time) plus data entry.
	- The quality of the data may possibly decrease, especially if collection and data entry are delayed (interviewer not used to it).
	- There is need to be attentive to confidentiality (shared line, data interception, other person in the room)

Technological solutions: The same as used previously, i.e. paper forms or ideally mobile data collection solutions such as:

- KoBoToolbox: via web forms (Enketo)
- SurveyCTO: via the universal web interface
- ONA : via web forms (Enketo)
- CommCare: via WebApps

Recommendations :

For relatively short surveys, or surveys with few respondents and especially for qualitative surveys. Surveys are carried out as before in MDC, but via telephone after adaptation of the questionnaire.

Preferable if you are familiar with MDC-type data collection in particular, if you do not need to invest in specific CATI software.

Do not underestimate the change in practice generated by telephone surveys, even for experienced interviewers - remember to train them well, debrief them at the beginning and check the quality of the data collected regularly.



Telephone interview checklist (to download with an email address - Humanitarian Data solution) : [Phone Call checklist](#) and sample protocol: [Spouse and gender relations phone survey protocol](#).

Recommendations for conducting telephone interviews: [Best practices for conducting phone surveys](#).

II.1.B. CATI - computer-assisted telephone interviewing

CATI is suitable for scaling up a telephone survey: the software automatically organizes the schedule of calls and callbacks, it excludes non-respondents (after so many non-responses, if there are wrong numbers...) and it makes it possible to record calls.

Respondents	Organization
+ Respondents do not need to be literate	+ Survey preparation is quick (questions need to be prioritized)
+ Respondents only need a "basic" mobile phone (not a smartphone) 	+ Adaptation to the tools is more or less fast (depending on the platform used)
+ Respondents don't need the Internet	+ Collected data is high quality (collection and data entry are combined)
+ There are no financial costs for respondents.	- Data collection is lengthy (one respondent at a time per interviewer)
	- There is a possible financial cost to be borne for the acquisition of the specific software.
	- There is the need to be attentive to confidentiality (shared line, data interception, other person in the room)

Technological solutions: These can be either:

- The same mobile data collection solutions as the CATI "starter kit" module of SurveyCTO (Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing), although few offer these solutions,
- Specific solutions dedicated to the sector such as Geopoll,
- Software dedicated to call centers such as Voxco CATI.

Recommendations:

For surveys involving a very large number of individuals with many interviewers and whose management needs to be automated.

Preferable if you can adapt quickly (survey and staff) and plan that future surveys can be carried out in this way afterwards (so that the investment is justified).

II.2. Self-administration

Self-administration of the questionnaire has two major implications:

- First, the honesty of the answers may increase, and thus the quality as well (because when respondents do not interact directly with an interviewer, they are pressured to answer honestly, and are less likely to adapt their answers to what the interviewer would like to hear);
- secondly, the quality of the answers may on the contrary diminish (because it is not possible to interact or to check that the person has understood the question - and thus to ensure that the answer is genuine and not a random answer).

II.2.A. SMS Survey

Respondents	Organization
+ Respondents only need a "basic" mobile phone (not a smartphone) 	+ Data collection is fast, and data is collected in real time
+ Respondents don't need the Internet	- You need a partner (or even a mobile aggregator) to deploy the survey (almost impossible to do without experience or specialized support).
- Respondents need to be literate	- The preparation of the survey is long (adaptation of the questionnaire): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - short questions - favor closed-ended questions with simple/multiple choices - avoid free text responses - no complex questionnaire possible - translation
- Respondents may have to bear the direct cost of the SMS - even if this cost is potentially low.	- The cost is significant to the organization if it is a first time.
	- SMS messages are very easily intercepted (not to be used for very sensitive issues) but are also more discreet than a call (e.g. to contact vulnerable women in a household).

Technologies:

Open source solutions exist but they require technical support (for a fee).

- FrontlineSMS: free open source technology in desktop version but cloud version (highly recommended) a paying service,
- RapidPro (former RapidSMS and TextIt): open source solution but requiring dedicated hosting, and even technical support. Allows the design of dedicated modules such as U-report.

A large number of companies specialising in the Aid sector also offer this type of service:

- Geopoll
- Viamo (formerly VOTO)
- Echo Mobile
- EngageSpark
- Telerivet - charged from 50 messages per day and 50 contacts

Finally, some mobile data collection solutions offer SMS surveys as an additional module that is quite easy to handle (to be preferred if you already use these solutions):

- For example, ONA integrates RapidPro (or How to pass submissions from RapidPro to ONA).
- CommCare allows you to create SMS surveys

A comparison of SMS solutions has been updated in 2019 <http://impacttrackertech.kopernik.info/digital-data-platform/> (Kopernik - International Plan)

Recommendations :

For relatively short and simple surveys of **large numbers of people with sufficient literacy skills**. Surveys need to be adapted. Consideration should be given to compensating respondents, either by direct reimbursement (airtime, airbundle) or by the organization bearing the cost through the technical provider (possible in many cases). You will most likely need support in setting up this type of system.



Success story : p.23 à 25 (GPPI - EN) : Technologies for monitoring in insecure environments

II.2.B. Survey by USSD

USSDs are sessions for the exchange of messages, with a response time set in advance by the mobile network operator. This is the system generally used to top up credit on a phone.

Respondents	Organization
+ Respondents don't need the Internet	+ Data collection is fast and data is collected in real time
+ Respondents only need a "basic" mobile phone (not a smartphone) 	+ Messages are not stored on the user's computer, so there are no confidentiality issues (suitable for surveys on subjects requiring discretion but with very little data protection).
+ There are no financial implications for respondents.	- The preparation of the survey is long (adaptation of the questionnaire): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - short questions - favor closed-ended questions with simple/multiple choices - avoid text responses - no complex questionnaire possible - translation
- Respondents need to be literate	- There is a high cost (partnership, network, assumption of cost by the beneficiary)

Technologies:

Providers of these solutions are generally only available in certain countries (the following solutions work in many African countries / ask for more information if you need it).

- inTarget: partner company to deploy USSD studies,
- Echo Mobile: partner company to deploy USSD studies to communities in Africa.

Recommendations :

For **short and simple or easily adaptable surveys with a literate audience**, and if you have the budget to partner with an aggregator. The main advantage of this tool, compared to SMS, is that it does not store messages, thus protecting sensitive responses. You will most likely need support for this type of system.

Preferable if your survey is short/modular, and if you have the funding for a partnership with an aggregator.



Success stories : [uSurvey](#) | [UNICEF Uganda](#) ; [MomConnect \(Afrique du Sud\)](#) ; [UNDP Climate Information & Early Warning Systems Communications Toolkit](#).

II.2.C. Smartphone web survey

Respondents	Organization
- Respondents need a smartphone 	+ Data collection is fast and data is collected in real time
- Respondents need internet access	+ The preparation of the survey is quick: there is no adaptation of the tools or the questionnaire.
- Respondents have a relatively high monetary cost to bear (internet)	+ The data is of quality (collection and input are combined)
- Respondents need to be literate	+ There is no additional cost
- Respondents need to be familiar with surveys	

Technologies:

The same as for MDC, only remote: [KoBoToolbox](#), [SurveyCTO](#), [ONA](#), [CommCare](#): via web forms sent by SMS, email, Whatsapp or other means of communication.

- Survey applications such as [LimeSurvey](#), [SurveyMonkey](#), [Framaforms](#)...
- [Geopoll - Monitoring and Evaluation Research in Developing Countries](#) :partner company to deploy mobile web studies.

Recommendations :

Self-administration of questionnaires via a smartphone can be a solution in the case of **targeted surveys** among groups already trained or used to questionnaires (social or medical workers for example, local authorities, etc.). It **is preferable for a group of literate respondents who are familiar with surveys and who have smartphones and internet access (Wifi in their business premises for example).**

II.2.D. Interactive Voice Response (IVR)

Respondents	Organization
+ Respondents do not need to be literate	+ Data collection is fast
+ Respondents only need a "basic" mobile phone (not a smartphone) 	- There is a high cost (partnership, network, assumption of cost by the beneficiary)
+ Respondents don't need the Internet	- The preparation of the survey is long (adaptation of the questionnaire):
+ There are no monetary implications for respondents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - short questions - favour closed-ended questions of the simple/multiple choice type - avoid text responses - no complex questionnaire possible - translation - message logging

Technologies:

- [RapidPro](#) (former RapidSMS and TexIt) open source solution (but requiring hosting or even technical support) also makes the IVR
- [Echo Mobile](#) - partner company to deploy IVR studies to communities in Africa.
- [Telerivet](#) - [Professional mobile messaging made easy](#)
- [EngageSpark](#) - [Send and Receive Automated Call and SMS Text Campaigns](#)
- [Viamo](#) - [A global social enterprise improving lives via mobile](#)

A comparison of SMS solutions has been updated in 2019 <http://impacttrackertech.kopernik.info/digital-data-platform/> (Kopernik - International Plan)

Recommendations :

For short and simple or easily adaptable surveys, and if you have the budget to partner with an aggregator. When respondents are unfamiliar with this type of "robotic" conversation, the rate of non-response or survey discontinuation may be high. See, for example, WFP's feedback on DRC [Interactive Voice Response mVAM](#). You will most likely need to be accompanied for this type of system.

Preferable if your survey is short/modular, and if you have the funding for a partnership with an aggregator.

Some more technical tips :

- a. As far as possible, **do not improvise and tinker**, especially in an emergency, but work with a partner experienced in remote data collection methods (ask your counterparts or study the solutions suggested above).
- b. Many countries have **restrictions on the volume and frequency of messages** from an account. Some countries may even require direct coordination with government departments and/or authorized third parties in order to send messages above a certain threshold. Remember to check this.
- c. If there is no pre-established telephone list and you need to conduct a survey, it is possible to **partner with a reputable supplier of sample** telephone numbers (to establish a large database, if it does not already exist within the organization). However, this method has ethical biases (no consent to use the numbers) and should be reserved for essential surveys.

d. Consider using **integration platforms** such as [OpenFN](#) or [Zapier](#) to facilitate interoperability between your different technology solutions.

e. You can also consider collecting photos or videos directly from the communities if they **have an internet connection**.

See the "Share a photo (localized or not)" fact sheet in the ICT toolbox: <https://blog.cartong.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Tool-Tip-sheet-3-Sharing-a-photo-and-geotagging-it.pdf>.)

III. Remote Alternatives to Accountability Mechanisms

It is likely that your usual mechanisms of accountability and exchange with communities will be impacted by the crisis (e.g., suspension of activities such as community mobilization, helpdesk, suggestion boxes, etc.). And even if your programmes are suspended and/or if your team members are now working remotely, it is important to maintain channels of communication and feedback⁵ (either to carry out remote monitoring of activities or, at the very least, of the context and to inform communities of the changes made by your NGO).

III.1. Possible alternatives

The same alternatives (with globally the same constraints and opportunities of deployment) as those mentioned above are available to you, namely :

1. **phone calls** from your usual contacts (focal points, local authorities...) to take or broadcast news,
2. **SMS or IVR** to send grouped information (e.g., to give a hotline number - see below) or to establish a dialogue - SMS platforms can in most cases also be used to **follow up individual messages reported** by callers.



Success stories :

[AlloLaafia: a mobile phone service to improve maternal and child health](#)

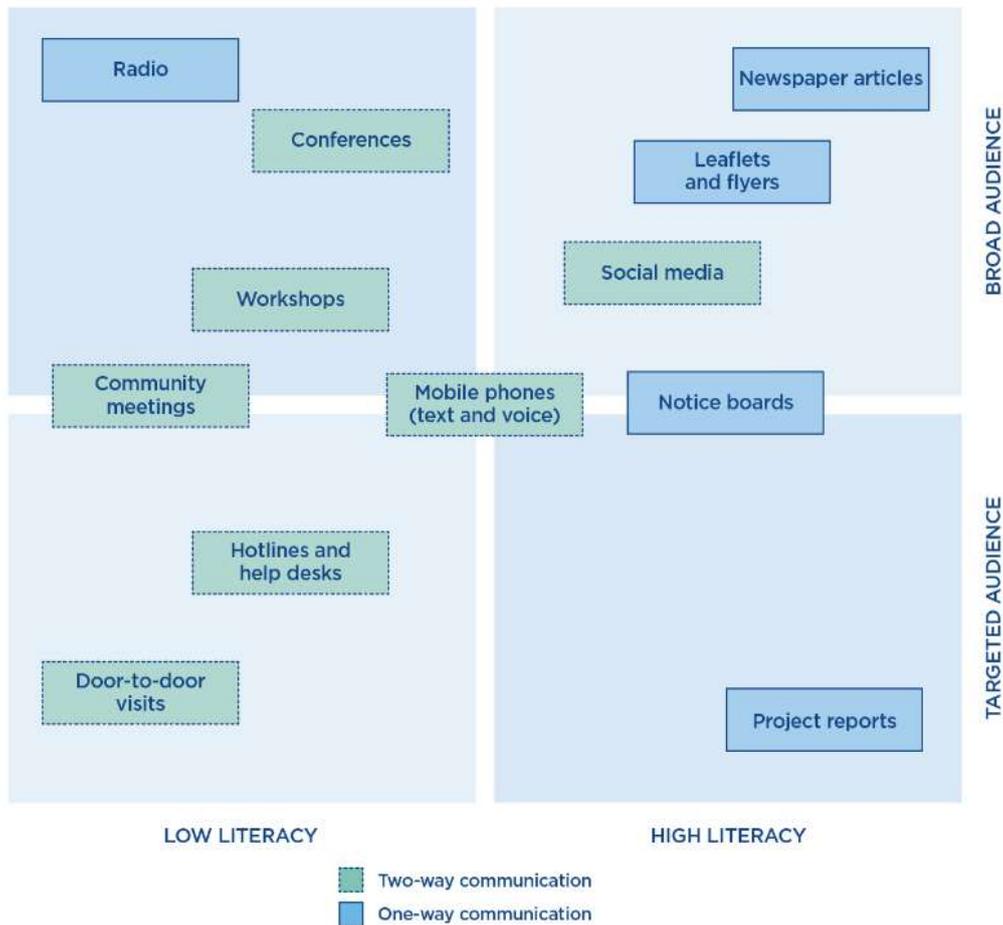
[How Frontline gave a voice to marginalized communities in Colombia](#)

In addition to these alternatives, there is also the possibility of :

3. Set up (or develop if existing) a **hotline** via a simple telephone number allowing affected communities to reach you. This hotline can be set up via a single contact person within your organization or via a mini "**call center**" involving several respondents. If you wish to set up a toll-free number, you will need to contact an aggregator.
4. if you are in an area with a wide internet connection and the use of **social media and/or instant messaging applications** is widespread, you can use **Facebook** (by creating a page for example for your project to receive private messages - [see part IV](#)), **Whatsapp**, **Viber**, etc. or even just an **email address to** collect feedback and exchange.
5. using **platforms that allow gathering several alert channels** (SMS, social media, etc.) such as through [Ushahidi](#).

⁵ You can also see [Humanitarian Data Solution's post on additional elements on the accountability dimension](https://www.humanitariandatasolutions.com/accountability/)

The diagram⁶ below shows the different communication methods possible depending on the literacy level and the size of your audience. Keep in mind that, as far as possible, it is advisable to have diverse communication channels (e.g. SMS and Whatsapp) and - if possible - not to rely solely on the telephone (given the biases generated by its use - see Part II. 2) to respond to your different audiences.



See also Global Communication Tools for Linking with Communities p.39-47: Climate Information & Early Warning Systems Communications Toolkit, UNDP.

⁶ MEAL DPro Guide 219 - Humentum http://mealdpro.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/MEAL-DPro-03_29_2019.pdf.

III.2. Good practices and lessons learned

1. Even if your accountability mechanisms are primarily intended to ensure the continuity of your activities, you must include elements of **response to the epidemic in** them! The management of an epidemic depends heavily on **the collective management of** information about the crisis, and it is ethically impossible to ignore this aspect.



a. **Your teams and protocols must therefore include** the possibility of answering questions from your interlocutors about Covid-19, informing on false rumors, referring cases, etc.



b. **You must ensure that you have the ability to respond to all types of feedback, complaints, questions and requests, even if they are outside of your scope.** This is because the beneficiaries expressing feedback or requesting information expect a response from the organization - without this capacity your interlocutors will lose confidence in your system. If you feel that you do not have the capacity in terms of processes (ability to refer situations, etc.) and resources to respond to all requests (a hotline is quite costly in terms of human resources for receiving calls and following up on requests), **it is strongly recommended NOT to set up a hotline or similar system.** Moreover, if the line is too often busy or inaccessible, the service will be little used because it is perceived as unreliable.



For more information, refer to the ALNAP guide [Closing the Loop: Effective Feedback in Humanitarian Settings](#).



c. Even more than in normal times, in this context of crisis, hotlines and feedback mechanisms are likely to multiply and create confusion among communities. It is therefore essential to **coordinate with all** the actors present (Red Cross, national alert system, other NGOs...) in your intervention zone to try to have unified communication methods and limit the number of hotline numbers, SMS, Whatsapp, etc. Therefore, be sure to find out what systems are in place or planned before creating your own communication channel. Coordination should also help to identify the most suitable communication methods and the questions people have.



d. On the basis of the Ebola experience⁷, anticipate possible **misuse of** your communication systems (include in your protocols the possibility of detecting "fake" calls).

2. If you don't already have a hotline or SMS facility in place, it is likely that at the beginning of its deployment you will receive few contacts or unexpected questions, etc. Building community trust in a new communication system often takes time.

3. Too many calls or text messages to aid recipients can lead to aid fatigue and can undermine acceptance of the systems.

⁷ <https://www.voanews.com/africa/sierra-leone-emergency-call-center-faces-daily-challenges> et <http://www.ictworks.org/2014/10/31/7-key-insights-in-using-ict-to-improve-ebola-response/>.

Ask yourself the right questions!

- a. Are there any hotlines that have already been used in the area? What are the lessons learned?
- b. Who among the affected populations has access to a telephone?
- c. Can they answer in writing (SMS)? Or just orally (call)?
- d. Is there a need to distribute phones? Chargers?
- e. What is the best way to reach all those involved?
- f. Where and how are the messages stored?
- g. Can you really respond to each individual request?

See p.16 for more information: [the GPPI guide](#).

IV. Data protection issues

 Like many past health crises, the Covid-19 crisis will (and already does) raise **many questions about the protection of personal data and the risks for the people concerned** (including stigmatization, social isolation, job loss and indirectly mental health), especially with regard to the mass surveillance tools put in place by the (mainly governmental) actors and the applications for tracing contaminated persons.



See the monitoring carried out by Privacy International, for more information, <https://privacyinternational.org/examples/tracking-global-response-covid-19> and feedback on the Ebola epidemic <https://cis-india.org/papers/ebola-a-big-data-disaster>.

 It is essential that, despite the urgency, NGOs keep in mind, in reorganizing their activities, the basic "Do no harm" principle.

The alternatives outlined above, compared to other digital equivalents probably already in place, entail more limited problems. The main elements to be taken into account :

01. Most of the solutions mentioned require **resorting to private third party actors** (both solution providers but also in some cases telephone network operators or even aggregators). The choice of the latter (who will be your subcontractors) will therefore have to be made by integrating their capacity to meet **their legal obligations in** terms of data protection (sufficient security of the system, sufficiently fine granularity of rights, location of stored data in accordance with the different national legislations to which you are subject etc.) but also by scrupulously checking their general conditions (no possible re-use of collected data for other purposes). Do not hesitate also to inquire about the **reputation of subcontractors** (e.g. dubious practices known in the past, etc.). **Contracts will** need to be carefully considered and validated if necessary by the legal services of your NGO.



See also OCHA's note on [private partnerships](#).

02. Sharing sensitive information (such as data on domestic violence, reproductive health, location of vulnerable people, etc.) by phone or SMS is generally strongly **discouraged**. In the current context, you may not have any other options than those mentioned above. Before choosing a type of solution, it is **imperative to carry out a contextual impact analysis**

(DPIA⁸) (even if it is very brief) based on the sensitivity of the messages that are to be exchanged, before making sure that the **risk/benefit trade-off is acceptable**.

In many situations, it may be considered that the risk generated by the data collection itself is higher (for example, that the SMS is read by a third party with access to the phone or that the conversation is overheard) than the need for tracking data.

In other contexts, it may be considered that SMSs, although unsecure and easily intercepted, may be an appropriate means of communication because it is easily accessible and more discreet for collecting data from vulnerable women (rather than using encrypted messaging applications for example). In this case, remember to provide appropriate advice to the people contacting you (delete the SMS if the information shared is sensitive) and above all to choose rigorously the time and day on which you send SMS messages to vulnerable people. Also make sure that telephones are not shared between members of the same household (especially with regard to sensitive data such as domestic violence).

- 03.** Possible **coordination with other actors** will probably require, even more than usual, the need to **exchange data**: remember to check that you have the consent of the data subjects and to assess the added value of the transfers before carrying out the transfer (DPIA cf. above). Anticipate also the issue of "data exchange agreements" between organizations. If you need to share data, anonymize them as much as possible. Under no circumstances share personal or sensitive data as open data.



See for example the procedure on HDX: [Three ways to share data on HDX](#)

- 04.** The solutions you will use will automatically generate quantities of **metadata** (data related to the call or SMS sending: location of the person, time of the call, etc.). You must be aware of this aspect and include it in your **risk analysis** (risk of re-use of this metadata by private or governmental third parties).



- 05.** As with any data collection, you will need to **adapt your data protection protocols**. Use calls only if beneficiaries have given their prior consent (and understand the risks of using this type of means) and make sure you include the **possibility of not being contacted again, regardless of the means used** ("opt out"). In particular, consider adapting your consent messages to your new means of communication (clearly explain who is calling, what will or will not be done with the data, ensure that the person is in a suitable/secure place to have the conversation) and strictly apply **the data minimization principles**. For example, it is very unlikely that recording conversations during telephone interviews/surveys is relevant. Also consider systematically **de-identifying and aggregating** shared data as much as possible, including internally within your organization (if you cannot completely anonymize it).

Implementing remote data collection will probably mean reviewing **the rights management and user accounts of your systems** (more people than usual will probably need to access them), so that only those who need to access the data can do so.

- 06.** You will probably find yourself very quickly with a **large amount of information** (phone list, SMS, etc.) for which you will need to apply **minimum retention times** (SMS conversations for a few weeks or months maximum, for example) and apply **maximum security precautions** (limiting access, encryption, etc.).



⁸ Many formats of DPIA exist: see for example if (your organization does not already have a standard template) https://www.unglobalpulse.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Privacy_Assessment_Tool_2019.pdf.

07. Explain, sensitize, train, explain, sensitize, train, explain, sensitize, train (*ad vitam æternam*) your teams to the risks posed by this type of mechanism, the reason for the measures implemented as well as the reason for the confidentiality clauses in their contracts. When it comes to data protection, the human factor (and the risk of unintentional error) is generally neglected in favor of system security, even though it is often the primary cause of data breaches (unintentional leakage, etc.).

Some additional resources:

WFP - [Carry out mobile phone surveys responsibly](#) (including IVR, SMS etc. in the margin).

Frontline SMS - data integrity guides and lessons learned on sensitive data collection <https://www.frontlinesms.com/impact-of-frontline/guides-tools-and-case-studies/>

GSMA - [GSMA guidelines on the protection of privacy in the use of mobile phone data for responding to the Ebola outbreak](#)

CICR - [Humanitarian Futures for Messaging Apps](#) (Opportunities and Risks of Messaging Applications in Humanitarian Settings)

ICRC - Data protection handbook (Chapter 11 on mobile messaging app) <https://shop.icrc.org/handbook-on-data-protection-in-humanitarian-action.html>

ICRC - The Humanitarian Metadata Problem - Doing No Harm in the Digital Era <https://privacyinternational.org/report/2509/humanitarian-metadata-problem-doing-no-harm-digital-era>



By way of conclusion

Finally, as soon as the situation allows it again, consider **returning to more traditional modes of data collection and communication**, as over-use of *remote* communication tools can easily generate a feeling of "comfort" and acceptance of reduced proximity (erroneous feeling of "control of the situation"...).

Furthermore, before continuing - possibly - the new methods of *remote* data collection and exchange set up during the crisis, remember to carry out a thorough **evaluation (even a quick one) of these methods and to give feedback to the teams** to see how they can be improved.