

# Humanitarian Outcomes

## Once Removed

### Lessons and challenges in remote management of humanitarian operations for insecure areas

An independent team of professionals providing evidence-based analysis and policy consultations to governments and international organisations on their humanitarian response efforts.

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Report prepared by Humanitarian Outcomes for the Center on International Cooperation under a project supported by the Government of Australia

25 February 2010

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## Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to the many humanitarian practitioners who shared their time and organisational documentation that formed the heart of this research. In particular, we thank Oxfam GB for its generous logistical support to the field research in Afghanistan and Médecins Sans Frontières USA for its assistance in arranging global interviews.

# Acronyms

ANSO	Afghanistan NGO Security Office
AWSD	Aid Worker Security Database
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CPE	Complex Political Emergency
DFID	UK Department for International Development
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN
FTS	Financial Tracking Service
HIC	Humanitarian Information Centre
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Humanitarian Affairs
IASMN	Inter-Agency Security Management Network
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IFRC	International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
IRIN	Integrated Regional Information Network of the UN
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
LNGO	Local Non-Governmental Organisation
MOSS	Minimum Operating Security Standards
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NCCI	NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OFDA	Office of United States Foreign Disaster Assistance
SACB	Somalia Aid Coordination Body
SAG	Security Advisory Group of InterAction
SCHR	Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response

SIRS	UN Security Incident Reporting Service
SMI	Security Management Initiative
SRA	Security Risk Assessment
UN	United Nations
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNDSS	UN Department of Safety and Security
UNFPA	UN Population Fund
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
UNRWA	UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation
WVI	World Vision International

## Executive Summary

As attacks against aid workers continue to rise in some of the world's most violent environments, international humanitarian agencies have increasingly adopted remote management arrangements as a way to continue assisting civilian populations while removing portions of their staff from harm's way. This report, prepared in collaboration with the Center on International Cooperation for the Australian Government, provides a focused examination of the practice of remote management in humanitarian assistance; its benefits, deficits, and risks; and ways it could be improved. In particular, it draws on case-based field research in Afghanistan in November and December 2009 and provides case comparisons from other insecure aid contexts to identify common patterns and lessons in practice.

Remote management, defined here as an operational response to insecurity, involves withdrawing or drastically reducing international and sometimes national personnel from the field, transferring greater programme responsibility to local staff or local partner organisations, and overseeing activities from a different location. Currently there are remote management programmes operating in at least six countries, and virtually all the major humanitarian providers have used the practice in one or more contexts. Agencies see remote management as a temporary and makeshift adaptation, yet in some contexts it has been a standard operating procedure for years.

Despite the prevalence of remote management programming in humanitarian assistance, little policy guidance exists within the international aid community on how to effectively plan for and implement it. At the same time, the demand for such guidance for humanitarian field staff in dangerous settings is evident. The small amount of material that has emerged has been driven by and developed mostly at the field level as lessons learned from context-specific experience.

The decision to undertake remote management—as opposed to suspending aid operations completely—involves a number of considerations, including the criticality of the programme (whether it involves life-saving work), the amenability of the activities/sector to weaker levels of technical oversight and (possibly) expertise, and the availability of current or potential local partners.

In some settings, the resort to remote management is tantamount to a de facto acknowledgment that the humanitarian principles of **independence** and **neutrality** have failed to be accepted. In certain highly contested environments, the majority of aid agencies cannot rely on the perception of their neutrality and impartiality as aid providers, independent of political agendas, to keep them safe. For some, shifting

to remote management programming recognises this challenge while continuing to serve the **humanitarian imperative** principle: getting aid to those in need as the first priority—even if it must be done from a distance. In highly unstable or generally lawless contexts criminal opportunists may threaten any actors with resources, regardless of the principles they espouse, which can lead aid agencies to determine that it is too insecure to operate directly.

While there are a number of different ways to implement remote management programmes, including using different types of implementing agents, methods of monitoring, and levels of direct oversight, they all share the common, important objective of maintaining some level of humanitarian assistance that would otherwise stop if an agency withdrew. Some remote management programmes can have positive consequences for local staff and community empowerment and ownership of assistance. They also, however, entail similar issues and share a number of common problems and pitfalls:

- **The remote management ‘trap’.** Once an agency shifts to remote management, a number of factors make it difficult to go back to prior modes of programming and can prolong the arrangement longer than may be necessary. A reactive, short-term decision-making mindset hinders strategic planning for transition; the now-distant international staff loses familiarity with the field setting, potentially skewed perceptions of insecurity and an organisational resistance to returning. However, it is still easier for agencies to return from a situation of remote management than from complete programme suspension.
- **Risk transfer.** While insecurity drives the decision to undertake remote management, often the result is not a security gain, but rather a shift of risk from internationals to nationals—who typically are provided with fewer security resources, materials, and training than their international counterparts. Agencies generally underestimate the risks to national/local staff and partners; the often-faulty assumption that they are less at risk than international staff amounts to a dereliction of agencies’ duty of care.
- **Effects on programme quality and effectiveness.** Agencies and donors generally accept that standards and the level of sophistication and quality of programme activities will slip, often dramatically, when an operation ‘goes remote’. Lack of planning and guidance on how to provide technical support, advice, and training to local staff and partners in remote arrangements exacerbates the problem.
- **Effects on programme efficiency and accountability.** Difficulties with logistics, communications, monitoring, and



interagency coordination are all heightened in remote management situations. In terms of reporting and accountability, agencies continue to focus mostly on 'upwards' accountability to their donors, with even less than usual accountability to beneficiaries. Finally, even if programme activities are reduced in remote management mode, there is by no means an automatic cost-savings. Agencies face different, but often high, expenses to operate remote programmes, particularly for communications equipment, and often for air travel and additional security cover. As one NGO manager put it, in remote management it often costs more to do less.

Agencies can ameliorate some of these challenges, this report argues, by strategic planning, innovative contextualised arrangements, and considered operational and policy guidance. The point is illustrated in the report with some examples of good practice from Afghanistan and other field settings.

The report concludes with a set of options and potential ways forward for the international humanitarian community. It emphasises the urgent need for greater attention and resources to be devoted to developing a holistic, 'whole of agency' approach to policy guidance and practical tools for this increasingly common yet unexamined practice. It also urges action for strengthening the duty of care to national and local staff and extending this to national partner organisations. This requires better and more-differentiated risk assessments for national and local staff, and capacity building measures to enhance both their ability to implement programmes and to bolster their security. The most promising examples of remote management found in this research involved coordination structures that were rooted in the local context and exhibited the potential for further, self-generated development in localised humanitarian action.

# 1 Introduction

Increasing violence against humanitarian aid operations in conflict-affected areas confronts international organisations with difficult choices and limited options. Despite a general improvement in aid agencies' operational security management, the rate of major attacks on aid workers has grown by over 60 percent in recent years (Stoddard, Harmer, and DiDomenico 2009). The increase has been driven primarily by a small number of extreme contexts, including Afghanistan, Somalia, and Sudan (Darfur), where aid operations are increasingly targeted for political reasons (in the case of the first two), and where even cases of simple banditry have come to entail violent tactics and lethal outcomes (in Darfur).

When faced with worsening security threats, aid organisations often must choose between the security of their staff and continued access to populations in need. A frequently seen programming adaptation in such cases has been the shift to remote management, which an agency often undertakes after a temporary suspension of all activities. In remote management, an international organisation will withdraw or reduce its staff in the area and shift responsibility for aid delivery to its national staff, local partner organisations, or contractors. Remote management programming has the important benefit of allowing some aid programming to continue, but it entails a number of hazards and disadvantages as well. These can include lower-quality and less-efficient service delivery, difficulties maintaining a strategic programme and planning focus, the risk of corruption, and accountability concerns. In addition, it raises serious ethical questions regarding the transfer of security risks from international personnel to national actors who often have fewer security resources, less training, and scant alternatives for other gainful employment.

Many organisations have identified significant challenges with the remote management approach and have called for additional information and analytical input on the topic. Donor governments are beginning to take an active interest in operational security for humanitarian aid work and seek information on options and good practice for programming in conflict-affected environments. This study aims to address these growing demands. The research team was initially approached by a group of NGOs operating in Darfur that was interested in comparative case studies and lessons learned from other violent environments where remote management was being practiced. The researchers designed the study with those practical information needs in mind, and received support from the Australian Government, under a grant to the Center on International Cooperation (CIC). The team consisted of CIC Non-resident Fellow Dr. Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer (who along with Abby Stoddard is a founding partner of the independent research group Humanitarian Outcomes), and independent consultant and former coordinator of the European Interagency Security Forum, Jean S. Renouf.

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## 1.1 Objectives of the research

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The study focused on the case of Afghanistan to examine remote management as it is currently being practiced by aid agencies in the field. The team complemented findings from field research in Afghanistan with desk-based research on other high-risk operational settings, including Iraq, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Sudan, for the purposes of comparison. The study aimed to extract generalisable lessons and highlight examples of good or bad practice for the practical benefit of aid agencies working in dangerous environments.

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## 1.2 Definitions

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Although there is no commonly agreed terminology for the various means by which aid agencies maintain their operations in highly insecure contexts, many have come to use the term ‘remote management’ (sometimes called ‘remote control’) for a humanitarian programming response to increasing insecurity.<sup>1</sup> Some resist the term, particularly if they feel it connotes a situation where the agency has *reduced* its control and management capacity. As a result, some agencies prefer to use the term ‘limited access programming’. In order to be consistent with prior published reports, and in keeping with the most common term of reference, the authors of this report have used ‘remote management’ as the designation for the practice to be studied.

Remote management is defined here as an adaptation to insecurity, and an aberration from normal programming practice. It is not, therefore, intended to describe a type of programming that some organisations undertake as standard practice, in which the international organisation typically has a very limited operational presence and channels its aid resources through national and local organisations and community groups. This type of programming often has capacity building of civil society entities as a major objective. Rather, the remote management arrangement, in the sense we are using it here, denotes a *shift* in approach as a reaction to what the agency deems an unacceptable level of risk. It is typically a last-resort modality, short of suspending operations completely. ‘When an agency adopts the remote management approach, it is generally with the understanding that it is sub-optimal and temporary. While programme quality, monitoring and impact might suffer, it is deemed

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1 Some analysts have unpacked the terms further. Greg Hansen’s comprehensive research on aid operations in Iraq delineates three separate definitions: ‘Remote control’, where managers make all programming decision and very little authority is delegated to the field; ‘Remote Management’, where there is partial or temporary delegation of decision-making powers to the field; and ‘Remote Partnership’, which ‘entail an equal partnership and a near-complete handover of responsibility to local actors’ (Hansen 2008).

better than providing no support at all’ (Stoddard, Harmer, and Haver 2006, 38).

The research differentiates between international, national, and local staff. National staff members (sometimes referred to as ‘relocatable’ staff) are inhabitants of the country but not the particular area where the programme is being implemented. Local staff resides in the specific locality. Increasingly agencies have begun to recognize the need to differentiate the risks to national and local staff. National staff may be as vulnerable to certain threats as their international counterparts may. In turn, local staff may face different sources of threat (for instance, other locals resentful of their relatively high incomes from their international employers). When a programme is already managed solely by national staff in some contexts, the decision to shift to remote management entails removing national staff (plus any staff local specifically under threat) from the implementing environment and leaving the programming tasks to local staff, partner organisations, or contractors deemed to be less at risk.

The research looked at the practices of operational humanitarian organisations, which include international and local nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), the humanitarian agencies and offices of the United Nations, and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. These operational entities are referred to in generic terms as aid ‘organisations’ or ‘agencies’ throughout this report, and they are qualified by institutional type when appropriate. The policies of the major humanitarian donor governments were also examined in relation to security for aid operations. The report refers to these governments and their donating agencies as ‘donors’.

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## 1.3 Methodology

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The study used both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide evidence of current practice, seeking where possible to measure trends in numbers

of agencies and programmes, while also relying heavily on information gleaned from interviewing and, in the case of the Afghanistan, field research and participant observation. Interview questionnaires and a research matrix (attached as Annex 4) were designed by the research team to establish a common research framework for the purposes of comparative analysis. This framework consisted of an analytical approach to the subject comprised of the following areas of inquiry:

- The context, conditions, and triggering events in which the remote management decision occurs
- The various types of arrangements currently seen in the field and general trends in policy and practice around remote management
- The different profiles of national or local actors assuming the programming responsibilities
- Programme criticality and the humanitarian imperative to continue aid operations
- Issues of programme quality and effectiveness
- Humanitarian coordination challenges
- Issues of accountability (upward and downward)
- Ethical and liability issues for aid organisations
- Fundraising and donor relations concerns
- Local perception and prospects for humanitarian principles and the pursuit of acceptance
- International image and public relations concerns

The structure of this report is framed by this series of issue-areas.

#### *Field-based research: Afghanistan*

Team member Jean S. Renouf undertook a two-week field visit to Kabul, Afghanistan, to document and analyse the use of remote management by aid agencies in this particular field setting. Team members chose Afghanistan because of its status as one of the three most insecure operational contexts for aid work and one that had seen a significant contraction of international aid agency field presence resulting in remote management adaptations. While in Afghanistan, the researcher interviewed thirty-three humanitarian practitioners from operational organisations and donor agencies.

#### *Desk-based document review and synthesis of prior research findings*

Project managers Adele Harmer and Abby Stoddard, drawing upon the knowledge base acquired over five years of research on humanitarian operational security, undertook a desk review and global policy analysis of remote management in humanitarian operations. They synthesised findings from recent research on aid agency policy and practice, including extensive consultations and document research undertaken for the upcoming revised edition of the Good Practice Review, *Operational Security Management in Violent Environments* (ODI, forthcoming), prior interviews on the subject with over six hundred relevant personnel within the humanitarian community undertaken from 2005 to the present, and a review of the latest secondary and gray literature in the field. In addition, the researchers maintain a comprehensive set of global statistics on the attack against aid operations, the Aid Worker Security Database, from which general insecurity trend information was drawn.

#### *Key informant interviews*

In addition to the thirty-three interviews conducted as part of the Afghanistan research, the team carried out in-person and telephone interviews of twenty-five humanitarian personnel and operational security professionals from a variety of headquarters and field settings within the global humanitarian community. Informants were selected based on their experience in humanitarian programming in dangerous environments, and/or their expertise in security management. Informants with current or recent experience in the operational contexts of Iraq, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Sudan were sought for the purpose of comparing cases to Afghanistan. A full list of interviewees is attached as Annex 3. All interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis, and the report refrains from naming specific organisations in terms of their policies, practices, and experiences with remote management. This is done out of consideration for ongoing security and confidentiality concerns of the subjects.

## 2 The context and rationale for insecurity-induced remote management practices

### 2.1 Trends in aid worker insecurity

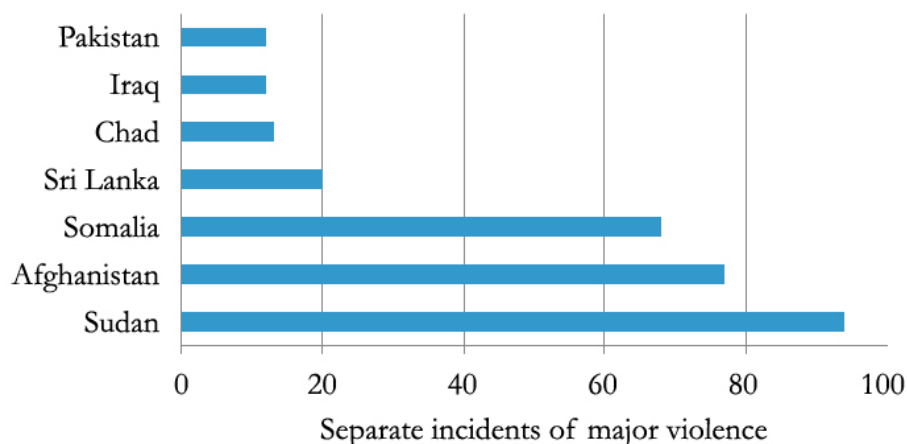
The number of major attacks against aid workers in most operational settings around the world has remained stable or slightly declined in recent years. However, in a small number of complex political emergencies marked by internal conflicts with active fighting and international involvement (Afghanistan, Chad, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan) attacks against aid workers are at all-time highs. By themselves, these countries account for the vast majority of attacks over the past few years. In addition, in these highly insecure environments, the tactics of violence have become more sophisticated and lethal, while at the same time more broadly targeted across the aid community. These settings have also seen the rise of politically motivated attacks, as opposed to simple criminal acts, and a pronounced spike in incidents—especially kidnappings—that affect international staff, and which can serve the economic, political, and visibility goals of the perpetrators.

In Afghanistan, the government’s struggle to project legitimacy and a credible exercise of control and

authority beyond Kabul has resulted in a precipitous decline in security for international aid operations. The Taliban and their affiliates have regained control of most of the southern and eastern parts of the country as well as an increasing number of areas in the north. As Ahmad Rashid notes, ‘The Taliban expansion in 2008 was matched by its extraordinary progress in improved military tactics: more sophisticated ambushes, suicide car bombs, mine warfare, multiple urban terrorist attacks, and targeted killings and kidnappings to demoralise the Afghan public and Western civilians. The Taliban began to primarily target aid workers, the Afghan police and government officials, thereby undermining all attempts to establish state control’ (Rashid 2009).

The trends in targeted attacks against aid workers in Afghanistan and elsewhere leave aid agencies in these settings with difficult choices. They must grapple with ethical dilemmas about whether to leave or stay, and how to continue providing much-needed aid. In recent years, many agencies have devoted greater attention and resources to professionalising their operational security, including developing more

**Figure 1** Highest-incident countries, 2006–2008



**Source:** The Aid Worker Security Database (Stoddard, Harmer, and DiDomenico 2009, 4)



sophisticated methods for risk assessment, and more rigorous humanitarian negotiation to obtain secure access. However, these efforts have not proven sufficient to ensure their security in the most violent operational environments. Lacking alternatives, agencies working in such contexts have at times adopted extremely low-profile approaches or used a highly visible deterrent strategy in the form of armed guards and armed escorts. However, these are considered last resorts and temporary fixes; agencies recognise that in the end these approaches can detract from security. For many agencies, the option to withdraw or suspend programmes is preferable to hiring armed protection.

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## 2.2 Shrinking humanitarian access in the most violent settings

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It is commonly understood that attacks on aid workers have a direct impact on the size and reach of the humanitarian operational presence in a country. When a major security incident takes place—for instance, if an aid worker is killed—the affected agency and others in the area will typically suspend operations, at least for a short period, while they reassess the security situation. Staff may be pulled back to the capital city or remain in situ with their movements restricted while reassessment happens. Some agencies will decide the risk has become unacceptable and pull out completely; others may scale back their programming in terms of location or types of activities.

While there is not a great deal of hard data on the extent of the phenomenon, preliminary findings from the AWSI illustrate the direct correlation between violence and shrinking access or presence. Between 2006 and 2008, 82 of the 380 major reported security incidents (nearly a quarter) directly resulted in the suspension, withdrawal, or relocation of humanitarian operations immediately afterward. In 2008, twelve large NGO programmes in six different countries came to a halt after security incidents (Stoddard, Harmer, and DiDomenico 2009). In addition, the number of suspensions

following incidents in the highest-risk environments nearly doubled each year since 2006.

The extreme example of aid agency flight has been south-central Somalia (Stoddard, Harmer, and DiDomenico 2009) where, at the time of writing, no international agencies have deployed any non-Somali expatriate staff for several months, and the vast majority of operations are being funded and managed remotely through local staff or local partner organisations. The majority of the international humanitarian presence effectively disappeared from this part of Somalia in mid-2009; extensive management and coordination structures based in Nairobi, Kenya, support the local organisations and staffs of agencies that continue to undertake relief activities. Assistance inside Somalia has recently declined further with the suspension of WFP food deliveries for security reasons, announced in January 2010. Far from the ‘short-term contingency’ scenario that many agencies think typifies remote management, in Somalia it has become a standard operating procedure for international agencies over the long haul.

In Darfur, Sudan, access has been reduced not only by agency responses to insecurity, but by government restrictions on international presence, such as the expulsion of thirteen large international NGOs in 2009 that reduced aid delivery capacity by an estimated 40 percent or more, and caused some organisations to lose total contact with their national staff in country (NGO interviews 2010). Security conditions have continued to worsen, with more deadly armed attacks against aid operations, particularly on the road, and a recent rising trend of kidnappings. At the time of writing, agency staff operating in Darfur were reporting that, in general, only three state capitals and a few other large towns were considered safe enough for international humanitarian staff to stay overnight, although recent data provided by UNDSS suggests the number may be higher.<sup>2</sup> Expatriates visit other locations only

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<sup>2</sup> UNDSS data compiled from NGOs reportedly indicates that as of 10 February there were seventy-two staff overnighing in eighteen ‘deep field locations’, i.e., outside state capitals. In these deep field locations, there remains some road travel but this tends to be largely by rented vehicles.

on day trips, often by helicopter, to avoid travel on insecure roads. Therefore, there is significantly less international presence in the deep field; international agencies have used various combinations of national and local staff, local authorities, local partners, and commercial contractors to carry out aid programs with limited direct supervision.

Since the bombing of the UN and ICRC offices in Baghdad in 2003, aid agencies working in Iraq have used different approaches to continue relief programming in the face of unacceptably high risks to staff in many parts of the country. These have run the gamut from ‘hard security’ approaches, such as the use of armed guards and escorts, to extremely low-profile approaches where an agency’s personnel and activities are designed to be invisible to the general public and would-be perpetrators (staff in these cases use locally rented vehicles and often live and work out of private homes). Although the security situation inside much of Iraq has reportedly improved enough for some agencies to begin redeploying some expatriate staff, for the moment low-visibility remote management remains the primary way of working for the majority of international organisations, with many maintaining management and coordination structures in Amman, Jordan. UN operational security requirements, in particular, are higher in Baghdad and other places in Iraq than in any other place in the world. UN facilities have their own security, which is then surrounded by security provided by US and Iraqi forces. Staff cannot leave their compound, and have no access to their programs. Nationals who undertake programs, and other local entities that monitor them, are often unable to report on progress in person because access within the UN perimeter is so difficult.

The security situation in Sri Lanka that led to the evacuations of international humanitarian personnel and the shift to remote management in 2008 and 2009 was unique in its circumstances and suddenness. When the Sri Lankan government forces pressed their military campaign into the LTTE-held areas in the north and east of the country (effectively trapping tens of thousands of civilians in a combat

zone), they gave advance notice to the international community and warned them that they could not guarantee their safety if they remained. The small number of UN agencies and NGOs that were still in the contested area in September 2008, when the major fighting began, evacuated their remaining internationals along with national staff working and residing in areas other than their home area. At this point, they had a very short time to decide whether and how to continue programming remotely to assist the largely displaced and needy population inside the combat zone—which effectively included their own remaining local staff. The organisations that asked their local staff to continue providing assistance under the siege conditions did so at great risk, particularly since the government sought to block communications to and from the area.

Afghanistan, too, has seen a dramatic shrinking of the humanitarian footprint because of insecurity. According to the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO), because of rising attacks against aid workers, increasingly perpetrated by armed political opposition groups as opposed to common criminals, more than half of the country’s thirty-four provinces are now ‘no-go’ areas for international aid workers (ANSO 2009). While international humanitarian personnel have largely drawn back from the provinces to Kabul, the security situation in that city has also deteriorated. Armed opposition groups regularly manage to mount significant attacks in the increasingly fortified capital, including a major assault on a United Nations guesthouse on the early morning of 28 October 2009, which left five UN staff dead.

Along with the rise in attacks, the number of projects currently being implemented remotely in Afghanistan has increased compared to the previous year. According to a donor representative, nearly a third of the NGOs it funds in that country are in remote management mode due to insecurity. An interviewee involved in humanitarian coordination in Afghanistan indicated that roughly two-thirds of the international NGOs were now implementing projects remotely, through either local staff or local partners. Among the INGOs interviewed in Afghanistan, the

number of projects they operate under security-induced remote management arrangements remains a minority compared to the overall number of projects. The fact that more aid is being provided in the most accessible areas, while less programming takes place in the more dangerous ones, explains why remote management remains a small proportion of the total number of programmes. In this regard, it is important to note that when security conditions become severe enough to warrant a remote management arrangement for some agencies, others often take the decision to shut down programming

permanently. A few interviewees related their agencies' internal debates on the issue, with some staff adamant that if the only way to operate was remotely, then they should not be in the setting at all.

Finally, it bears repeating that in all these settings it is the local civilian populations that usually bear the brunt of violent attacks and security-related casualties and who then see their relief assistance, and sometimes a measure of protection, wane as attacks drive out humanitarian operations.

### 3 Remote management arrangements: Observed practices and general trends

Operating with reduced international staff presence and relying on others for implementation is by no means a new phenomenon. It has been utilised in conflict areas throughout the 1980s and 1990s in many of the same contexts as today, including Somalia, Afghanistan, and Sudan. Despite the long history, little has been documented on the subject, partly because agencies see remote management as a temporary measure that is not their norm in programming. Yet recent analysis suggests that remote management occurs frequently, for considerable periods of time, and in such a variety of locations that a strategic approach is necessary (Stoddard, Harmer, and Haver 2006).

Most organisations have no formal policy on remote management; any policy or good practice guidance that exists has been driven by the field. Some agencies, however, have begun to examine the issue at headquarters because of the monitoring and other challenges raised in the field. All note that, where possible, they are attempting to draw lessons from other contexts. Somalia, in particular, has been a focus in these efforts.

For the UN, its agency staff point out, working through national staff when security requires it is a long-established practice. There are special procedures for continuity, such as three-month salary advances, relocation of families, and commodity-support plans. Local partners and contractors, however, are not covered by these protocols.<sup>3</sup> The UN's Field Security Handbook guides staff to maintain the highest possible level of support in terms of logistics and security inputs, but it is recognized that this is often very difficult. The UN's humanitarian agencies themselves, however, have no internal organisational policy or guidelines on remote management.

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#### 3.1 Types of remote management operations

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Remotely managed aid operations can be implemented by national or local staff, national or local partner organisations, locally hired commercial contractors, or any combination of these. While

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<sup>3</sup> This issue is currently being examined by the UN's Interagency Security Management Network (IASMN) in relation to the Saving Lives Together initiative.



particulars can vary widely, the common defining feature is continued international ownership and responsibility over the programme without permanent international ground presence, due to insecurity.

The level of direct management an agency's international staff has also varies. At one end of the spectrum, nearly all decision-making remains in the hands of the relocated international staff; project site visits are undertaken on a regular basis (often multiple times a week, but never overnight); and there is face-to-face communication with project staff, contractors, government officials, and even beneficiaries. This practice is sometimes called semi-remote management. At the other end of the spectrum, international personnel rarely or never visit the field sites (they may be located some distance from the project, i.e., in the capital city or neighbouring country), and decision-making is passed to national or local staff. Monitoring is conducted by remote means such as digital photographs and third-party verification.

Remote management can be undertaken by degrees, as a mix of practices such as a combination of direct implementation by the agency with logistical services provided by an LNGO or private contractor. In other circumstances, an organisation may directly manage its projects in a given area, but may remotely manage them in another area within the same country, with limited visits by the international or even the national staff to monitor the remotely managed field sites.

In the case of Afghanistan, the field research identified three main types of remote management operations being practiced:

- Senior national staff at the provincial level are responsible for a programme. Due to insecurity, international staff pay few or no visits to the project sites; however, international staff, at times, regularly visit provincial field offices. National staff supervise the implementation of the work.
- Local staff are responsible for implementation, with no visits from international staff and few or no visits from the national staff.

- Partners, usually Afghan NGOs (LNGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs), at the local level are responsible for implementation, with no visits from international staff and few or no visits from national staff. For projects involving construction or rehabilitation of infrastructure, however, a local company is usually the implementer.

The role the organisation plays, for example whether they are a coordinating or implementing agency, may determine the type of remote management operation. Coordinating agencies such as UNICEF, for example, note that shifting to remote management is a significant policy decision because it takes away one of the most important added values the agency provides: direct monitoring of project implementation against agreed outcomes, and coordination with similar projects it oversees.

Compared with the UN, INGOs generally are more flexible in making decisions regarding implementation approaches, partly because they are not constrained in the same way by security phases and staff movement. NGOs have pursued different approaches to remote management in an attempt to understand what works best. NGO interviewees noted that in some cases they saw poor results from more comprehensive remote management approaches and therefore shifted back to direct implementation, reducing the number of partners and increasing the direct delivery of programmes through national and local staff.

The type of sectors organisations are working in may also guide the type of remote management operation (see section 3.2).

The study proposes a classification of remote management practices in which the differentiating criteria is the type of *presence at the project site*.<sup>4</sup> The type of presence at a field site is not only a function of responsibility but of access related to security. Table 1 highlights the strengths, weaknesses, and potential hazards of different types of remote management arrangements.

<sup>4</sup> This draws from A. Stoddard, A. Harmer, and A. Haver, *Providing Aid in Insecure Environments* (London: ODI, 2006).

**Table 1 Strengths, weaknesses, and potential hazards of different remote management arrangements**

Presence at project site	Description	Potential benefits	Potential weaknesses and hazards
International staff	<p>Senior agency staff visit the project site on a regular basis.</p> <p>Senior agency staff direct programming and manage employees from a distance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides continuity of leadership</li> <li>• Shows accountability and transparency from better monitoring and oversight</li> <li>• Demonstrates solidarity with local population, and possibly offers a level of ‘protection by presence’</li> <li>• Maintains perception of neutrality and impartiality</li> <li>• Shows that management has a better understanding of the context which can lead to better planning and implementation</li> <li>• Encourages donor trust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limits transfer of responsibilities to national and local staff</li> <li>• International visits attract attention to the project</li> <li>• Leads to possible suspension or withdrawal if a staff member is a victim of violence</li> <li>• Communication difficulties due to lack of continuous international presence and management oversight</li> </ul>
National ‘relocatable’ staff and/or local staff	<p>National and/or local staff assume decision-making authority.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increases ownership by national/local staff</li> <li>• Emphasises capacity-building</li> <li>• Ensures sustainability in the programme</li> <li>• Allows monitoring and evaluation by agency staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Puts pressure on staff (if not trained, lacks capacity)</li> <li>• Allows potential for corruption/collusion</li> <li>• Exposes national staff (if security assessment determines they are at risk and the organisation has not responded appropriately with training, assets, and procedures)</li> <li>• Communication difficulties</li> <li>• National/local staff may accept a greater degree of risk than is deemed appropriate</li> <li>• May lead to suspension or withdrawal if a staff member is a victim of violence</li> <li>• Risks undermining the perception of neutrality and impartiality</li> </ul>
Local NGO	<p>The international agency hands over programme/ project to local NGO to manage.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shares the values of the aid organisation</li> <li>• When done properly, supports the development of an indigenous civil society</li> <li>• Emphasises capacity-building and sustainability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often has limited capacity and weak incentives for accountability to donors and beneficiaries, as well as the possibility of corruption</li> <li>• Communication difficulties</li> <li>• Transfers risk</li> <li>• Local NGO risks being used only as service provider</li> <li>• Risks undermining the perception of neutrality and impartiality</li> </ul>

**Table 1 (continued)**

Presence at project site	Description	Potential benefits	Potential weaknesses and hazards
National or local government authorities	The international agency develops programme in consultation with government authorities and/or hands over existing programme as ‘exit strategy’.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promotes long-term development</li> <li>• Emphasises capacity-building and sustainability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risks undermining the perception of neutrality and impartiality, especially if the host government is a party to the conflict</li> <li>• Government may not have local support</li> <li>• Possibly allows weak accountability to beneficiaries</li> <li>• Risks corruption</li> <li>• Transfers risk</li> </ul>
Commercial contractors	The international agency has a fee for service arrangement with a private firm, e.g., trucking company, to do logistics or other activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increases technical capacity</li> <li>• Infrastructure projects often seen as easier to monitor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not share the values, including humanitarian principles, of the aid organisation</li> <li>• Communication difficulties</li> <li>• May lower quality of service</li> <li>• Risks corruption and collusion</li> <li>• Transfers risk</li> </ul>
Community based organisations	International agency arranges for community group or leaders to implement a portion of the programme (e.g., aid distribution).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partners have a vested interest in the right implementation of the projects</li> <li>• Promotes best community participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity deficits</li> <li>• Projects can only be implemented at a very local level, and have to be small in scale</li> <li>• Lacks impartiality</li> <li>• Communication difficulties</li> <li>• Risks corruption and collusion</li> <li>• May put populations at risk</li> </ul>

### 3.2 The remote management decision: Triggering events and planning processes

For the most part, the initial decision to shift to remote management remains a reactive one rather than part of a planned strategy. Triggers include specific incidents such as the kidnapping of an international staff member or a significant decline in security. Moving to remote arrangements might indicate an organisation’s strong motivation to continue serving its beneficiaries as long as possible, but it might also be taken for political reasons. An interviewee in Afghanistan, for example, highlighted that the organisation in question was an implementing partner of the National Solidarity Programme<sup>5</sup> and managers believed it was politically important to keep its programme running, even

5 The National Solidarity Programme was created in 2003 to develop the ability of Afghan communities to identify, plan, manage, and monitor their own development projects through the promotion of good local governance.

though they otherwise would have withdrawn. As noted in an earlier study, some agencies decide to maintain a presence for solidarity or visibility reasons—what World Vision calls ‘keeping the light on’ and some NGOs refer to as ‘protection by presence’—rather than completely close the programme (Stoddard, Harmer, and Haver 2006). This was OCHA’s rationale in Aceh during the period of martial law, and provided the impetus for agencies maintaining an aid presence in Iraq and more recently in Darfur, Sudan.

The reactive nature of decision-making can also inform the way decisions regarding the programme are carried out, as one interviewee noted:

It’s really easy to get trapped into a reactive situation—operating day to day—asking ourselves how do we maintain access today and tomorrow rather than more strategically . . . . [What we need to ask is] ‘do we have the ability to keep working safely a year from now?’ This

means thinking both about the programme's direction and about the support services that will be needed in six months, a year, two years' time.

At the field level, most interviewees recognise that decisions regarding the nature and types of programmes to be undertaken in highly insecure contexts would be better informed if the possibility of remote management adaptations was considered from the outset, at the programme design stage, if there is even a small chance that the international staff presence might prove difficult.

In Afghanistan, in the few cases where the adaptation to remote management was planned, the rationale for such a move is often only partially driven by insecurity; for one organisation, the rationale for using local partners included the interest in developing civil society, access expansion, and donor support and sustainability.

This reactive orientation may be slowly changing. A positive finding from the research in Afghanistan was that at least two country directors working on their 2010 strategies were asked by their headquarters to consider scenarios where programs would have to be managed remotely, including from neighbouring countries.

Planning for remote management has considerations. The size of the programme is an issue. Agencies note that large, complex programmes require significant planning for remote management and generally require international staff monitoring and oversight. Smaller programmes are more likely to be remotely managed through national staff or local partners. In general, agencies find it makes sense for more complex programming to be reconsidered under remote management, with simpler options sought.

Agencies claim that the level of vulnerability and need among beneficiaries is a key factor in determining whether to conduct aid by remote management. As a general rule, most agencies claim that life-saving interventions are prioritised as long as possible; if this is the service delivery goal then the rationale to maintain delivery by some means is much stronger than it would be if development work was being undertaken. In practice, however,

it is not the case that only life-saving programmes are prioritised. Previous research highlighted that in Iraq, for example, most agencies tended to work in areas where their resources and capabilities have the greatest chances of yielding results, and where they are able to assume security responsibilities for their staff. This has led, arguably, to agencies deviating not only from the humanitarian imperative, but also from the principle of impartiality (Carle and Chakm 2006).

The sector in which agencies are programming also has a bearing on the decision to shift towards remote management, although opinions as to which sectors are suitable for remote management differ between agencies. In previous research, some agencies maintained that 'soft services' such as reintegration and psychosocial programmes might be more easily undertaken by local entities. In northern Uganda, for example, with no access even for national staff, World Vision trained community volunteers to carry out a child soldier reintegration programme (Stoddard, Harmer, and Haver 2006). This remains the case today in some contexts. In all settings examined for this study, however, it was found that the protection sector suffered under remote management. This is not only due to the limited experience of local organisations and the fact that it is an inherently risky area of programming in an already insecure environment, but because it is tied in many ways to the presence of international witnessing and advocacy.

An INGO working in Darfur highlighted that making adaptations for primary healthcare work was possible (using helicopters to move drug supplies and staff, and a private trucking company to undertake the logistics of moving goods). The INGO could fly local personnel (often local health authorities) to the capital for training and capacity building. The same INGO noted that it was much harder to remotely manage water supplies and sanitation (WATSAN), as partners and local staff lacked technical skills. In addition, building and managing capacity without being on site was difficult. In contexts where the technical skills are available through, for example, local contractors, WATSAN construction work can be relatively easy to monitor remotely through

photographs of progress. This type of evidence is far harder to attain for ‘softer’ intervention areas.

When programming for food aid, which is particularly vulnerable to attack, agencies often choose to subcontract to local private contractors, such as those used in Somalia, Sudan, and Afghanistan. In Somalia, for example, WFP began using private contractors for food transportation in 1997, and in turn transferred the security risks to these entities (Gundel 2006). Goods were considered to be more secure than they might be in any other arrangement because Somali transporters are protected by armed vehicles, and have local knowledge, membership in the clan system, and access to traditional jurisprudence mechanisms (Gundel 2006). A report by the Sanctions Committee’s Monitoring Group on Somalia however found that as much as 50 percent of the food aid is being diverted through a corrupt web of partners, contractors, WFP staff, and local armed groups. WFP claims that there is no proof that its staff or partner organisation have diverted aid and have welcomed an external investigation (UN Security Council 2010).<sup>6</sup>

Factors influencing whether an agency switches to remote management can be highly context specific. The range of local partner organisations, the quality of national staff, and their freedom and capacity to operate in a given country or region are factors. This is, perhaps, one reason shifting to an operational model has taken longer in Sudan, compared with contexts like Afghanistan and Somalia.<sup>7</sup> In Colombia, for example, WFP works entirely through 1,700 church groups and local community groups. By contrast, in Chechnya, very few local NGOs work as implementing partners due to the general level of mistrust that exists there, although working through national staff is common (Harker 2006). In the DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo), many international NGOs have found it difficult to identify

viable national NGO partners, citing concerns about lack of capacity, political affiliations, and the opinion that many NGOs are in fact private enterprises established for financial gain (Durrant 2006). In the DRC and Sudan, international NGOs have invested in partnerships with local government authorities not only because they believe that such initiatives will be more sustainable, but also due to the dearth of capable local NGOs (Interviews 2010, Durrant 2006).

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### 3.3 Design and execution of the remote management strategy

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Given the usually ad hoc and reactive nature of the decision to ‘go remote’, it follows that there would be a wide diversity of ways in which organisations set up their remote management arrangements. Interviews of agency missions in Afghanistan and in other settings where remote management was used indicated that most had not received any specific practical guidance or policy support from their headquarters when designing the strategy. Some representatives indicated that they were able to glean some elements of organisational guidance from various internal documents, such as human resources policies and cash handling protocols. For many the experience seems to have spurred the demand to develop more complete and explicit guidance on remote management strategy, ideally covering a variety of issues—building the capacity of the national/local staff and/or partners, properly assessing and mitigating their risks, monitoring and cross checking programme progress from remote locations—and insuring that adequate resources are available. As noted above, a few organisations indicated that they had plans to develop such guidance for use at either the global or mission level, or both. The driver behind this policy development has unquestionably been the field.

If the main factors in the decision of *whether* to undertake remote management are programme criticality for beneficiaries and the risk-to-benefit ratio for national and/or local staff, the question of *how* to execute the programmes depends on many different mission-specific considerations. Often ideas

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<sup>6</sup> See response from WFP: <http://www.wfp.org/Food-Aid-Somalia-Needy-UN-Report-response>.

<sup>7</sup> For an interesting discussion on the opportunities and challenges of working with Sudanese national NGOs, see: Sudanisation paper ‘Perspectives of INGOs and an appeal to the Government’ January 2010.



come out of internal brainstorming; in other cases, an office develops it gradually and incrementally as the situation evolves. In Darfur, the expulsion in March 2009 of many of the largest, established NGOs with well-developed organisational policies left a group of smaller and less policy oriented organisations that approached operations on a more ad hoc basis. As a result, the policy dialogue for making decisions regarding remote management was weaker than it might have been, with less possibility for sharing lessons and experiences from other settings.

In general, the agencies who already maintained working relationships with local partners as their normal way of operating benefitted from the prior familiarity and existing documentation such as MOUs and framework partnerships. Often these agreements already included systems for cash transfers, reporting, and other procedures that could be adapted or expanded for a remote arrangement.

One of the key findings in Afghanistan, which holds true for other remote management contexts, is that despite the fact that most NGOs consider remote management to be a temporary measure, very few have thought through an exit strategy or criteria to guide the shift back from remote management. A form of ‘path dependency’ appears, which can turn what was originally intended as a short-term stopgap measure into a more entrenched modality and mindset. This remote management ‘trap’ can be shaped by any or all of the following factors:

- **Potentially outdated or skewed perception of no-go areas.** Humanitarian actors have demonstrated the natural tendency to perceive greater danger in areas where their agency was not present, and a preference to stick with the known. When asked whether their organisation was considering expanding their areas of operations in Afghanistan, all interviewees agreed that the needs certainly justified it, yet many highlighted the danger of such a move. Said one NGO representative: ‘It’s too dangerous to go where we are not known, so we would rather just do more with the same population.’

- **Cost pressures of a protection-oriented security culture.** An agency representative with programs in Iraq and Afghanistan noted that the general security stance of international agencies in the locality can compel remote management decisions. When all UN agencies and some of the larger NGOs move to a highly protective stance, for example, other agencies feel compelled to follow suit, or risk appearing as the lone soft target and thus increasing their risk. This same dynamic has been noted in Darfur and other high-risk environments. But, with costs for a protective approach being so high (one armored vehicle alone will run between \$120,000 and \$200,000), there is little hope that the agency could continue programming at its previous levels. In such cases, remote management may appear as the only viable option to keep aid flowing.

- **Bureaucratic inertia.** Other NGO representatives familiar with the Iraq and South Sudan contexts noted that the establishment of a longstanding remote management hub in a convenient location that has become a stable family posting (such as Amman and Nairobi) can, for some agencies, pose its own disincentives to changing the status quo.

Despite the often-protracted nature of remote management programming, most interviewees stated that the goal was for international staff to eventually return to a more traditional in-situ approach once security conditions improved and acceptance of the organisation increased. This goal is informed by a mix of concerns regarding quality control and project management, as well as pressures from donors to have international staff on the ground. However, some organisations have used remote management as the interim step toward ending their programming presence. If done with careful planning, remote management can be a useful and beneficial transition process in a country exit strategy.

### 3.4 The designated implementers and the remote management arrangement

Remote management can function through an international agency's national or local staff, local partner NGOs or community-based organisations (CBOs), local commercial contractors, or (least commonly) local authorities or public sector entities. Typically, an international organisation will use a combination of these for different programs, and often will contract a separate organisation or private firm alongside the local partner to monitor and report on their work. Conversely, one national NGO might provide programming aid for a number of different international agencies in their area of operations. A common feature is the hierarchical (as opposed to egalitarian) nature of the arrangement and the, usually unrealised, potential for capacity building of local individuals and organisations.

#### 3.4.1 National and local staff

Although on average international aid agencies tend to be over 95 percent staffed by nationals (Harvey,

Stoddard, Harmer, and Taylor 2010), in some agencies the most senior field management positions are held by international staff. In Afghanistan, several country directors acknowledged that, to their regret, they will probably never meet all of their Afghan staff, due to insecurity or remoteness of the projects. This provides a glimpse of the inherent difficulties of building organisational cohesion under remote management conditions.

A few NGOs deliberately avoided subcontracting arrangements with other organisations, or only did so if their staff could be involved in project activities in some capacity. One NGO operating remotely in Somalia made it clear that no programs were handed over to external entities; rather they invested in their own local staff in terms of training and security and operational requirements. Some interesting examples of 'international/national' staffing were found, particularly in Somalia, where an agency hired Somali expatriates living in Europe to move back and run programs inside the country. While representatives stress that this has not been a panacea, it nevertheless has the benefit of fielding staff with a higher level

#### **Afghanistan case illustration** Developing a shura system for project management

An INGO whose expatriate head of office had to be relocated from Kandahar to Kabul for security reasons set-up an internal *shura* (council) at the Kandahar provincial office, that included the five heads of programmes and all national staff members. In the absence of the expatriate, each shura member was given a chance to be the shura coordinator for at least a month. The shura coordinator was eventually designated by the international manager, in agreement with the shura members.

The shura is involved in all important decisions, which contributes to fostering ownership responsibility, and accountability. Providing a check and balance system, the shura reduces the sub-tribal interplay affecting the daily dynamics of the office and helps prevent fraud. In addition, it provides a weekly healthy interaction among shura members. Finances, logistical, and activities support are discussed and members of the shura are made aware of the general situation for the week.

The downside of the system is that it takes time for the shura to function as a real council, in particular since the shura members are from different Pashtun sub-tribes. Also, decision making is slower and the international manager in Kabul still needs to assess if the decisions made are a real consensus of the shura. This, however, allows each member to express his views.

Such a system does not preclude the need for visits from the Kabul office or for regular communications, but borne out of a deep working knowledge of the Afghan culture, the shura is proving itself to be highly valuable. See Annex 1 for a more detailed discussion of Tearfund Afghanistan's Remote Management 'Shura System'.

of training and preparation before they take over programming, while at the same time enjoying less visibility and better local access than non-Somalis could manage. Other agencies managing remotely out of Nairobi stressed the advantages of having relocated nationals or former internationals from inside Somalia, with their local knowledge and experience, brought out to help staff the Nairobi management structure.

Most agencies who have undertaken remote management offer their national and local staff high praise, while emphasising the need for further capacity building—which entails additional costs. The most frequently cited area was project cycle management, including report writing. Others included accounting, team management, and strategic vision and planning. Overall, the demonstrated commitment of the INGO and allocation of resources to build their staff’s capacity greatly varied from one organisation to another. One agency in Afghanistan has opened two training centers for national staff, local organisation partners, and those of other international agencies. Another agency that shifted to remote management when it was forced to leave Niger eventually turned the programme over to its national staff and assisted them in forming a new national NGO, including negotiating international donor funding to enhance their capacity. Most other capacity building initiatives fall well short of these examples, however, with the reasons ranging from lack of awareness to lack of time or opportunity.

Management and communication in remote operations are said to be helped enormously whenever face-to-face interactions can be arranged. Even with regular telephone and email communication, interviewees report that management suffers without in-person contact, and mutual distrust can potentially grow, particularly when there is high turnover of the international managing staff. Most agency interviewees in Afghanistan declared either having trust issues or ‘mixed feelings’ about the personnel implementing their remote programs, with concerns ranging from lack of appropriate skills and capacity to do the job, to possible corruption. As one international staffer

admitted, ‘The longer I stay, the less I trust my staff, as you have to watch everything. That’s why I have such a strong [negative] view about remote management.’ At the same time, resentments and the sense that their interests were not being protected by senior management were evident in local staff attitudes.

Different contexts and levels of skills and experience of national staff will call for different levels of directiveness in management. In Iraq, for example, the international agencies that have most effectively continued aid operations on a remote management basis have done so by relying heavily on cadres of skilled, competent national staff and decentralizing most decision making to the local level, while providing support and guidance from Amman (Hansen 2008). In other settings, heavier direction may be needed. In all cases, programme flexibility is essential; remote managers must guide but also be guided by their staff in the field, who are usually in the best place to determine what type of activities and modalities are possible or preferable.

#### *3.4.2 National/ local partner entities*

In general, for an agency contemplating a remote management arrangement, the lower the risk threshold, resource base, and organisational capacity, the more likely it will be to enlist the partnership of a local organisation, as opposed to maintaining a functional local staff presence in the insecure area. Remote programming through a partner, through an MOU or formal partnership agreement, has certain added difficulties, but is generally cheaper and less of a security liability burden. This fact, of course, is not the primary driver of such decisions in all cases; some international agencies may find it is simply the most appropriate and effective solution to channel their aid resources through a reputable and capable local body. The decision will depend on the level of capacity among individuals and organisations in the given locality, which will vary widely across settings.

While in some settings the problem is finding any functioning and capable local organisation to partner with, in others there may be hundreds of



### **Afghanistan case illustration** Developing the local partners' capacity in safety and security

A few INGOs combined their efforts to build the security risk management capacity of their *local partners*. An initial assessment showed, among others, that

- LINGOs are receptive to a practical approach;
- most partner organisations are not familiar with standard INGO security frameworks;
- a systematic approach to security needs to be developed;
- local training and consultancy capacity is rare;
- training alone is not sufficient, follow-up and feedback are essential;
- the process is time consuming - donors should be committed to deliver on the longer term; and
- collaboration between NGOs in a country reduces costs and ensures continuation of support.

The INGOs consequently decided to invest resources in providing training, individual support, and support in designing the safety and security policies of LINGOs.

Donors on their side, showed a willingness to institutionalise this type of capacity development.

organisations, and the challenge is to separate the credible ones from others that may be disreputable or seeking to advance agendas unrelated to humanitarian action. Inside Iraq, there are seven thousand registered local NGOs of varying types, but it is estimated that the majority of them are tightly linked to political parties, religious agendas, and even commercial business interests. According to those working in the country, INGOs seeking partners need to take special care to screen local organisations to make sure their aid services are provided impartially, are based on need, and have no other strings attached.

In areas of Afghanistan that have been under remote management programming for a while now,

the choice of the local partner generally follows a transparent selection in Kabul or at the provincial level, including a call for proposals, a tendering process, or a consultation. Several interviewees have highlighted the existence of policies to choose the partners, which include background checks and an assessment of the organisation's capacity, past experience, existing network, outreach capacity, etc. While local companies are usually contracted to implement major reconstruction and infrastructure improvements, LINGOs and CBOs are preferred for other sorts of projects.

As in Iraq, some organisations in Afghanistan have put measures in place to distinguish the 'real' local NGOs from those organisations that, although

### **Excerpt from** Adapting to Insecurity in Iraq

The agencies that have succeeded in sustaining safe access and operations [in Iraq] over time, often in the face of dramatic programming shocks, share a set of specific characteristics:

- they have created and nurtured networks of knowledgeable and reliable local facilitators and fixers
- they have nurtured a dedicated and capable staff, and delegate authority to the field
- they monitor their local context with a high degree of political acuity which allows them to make sound programming judgments in a volatile environment
- they have been able to mobilize donor resources, through contact with the Amman-based donor community or, in some cases, have generated funds locally inside Iraq.

Source: Greg Hansen. 'Adapting to Insecurity in Iraq,' Briefing Paper 1 in Focus on Operationality: Series of Briefing Papers on NGOs' and others' humanitarian operational modalities in Iraq, NCCI, January 2008.

registered as NGOs, are more commercial in orientation and do not share the core humanitarian values or commitment of the aid agency. The Ministry of Economy regularly closes down large numbers of illegitimate local NGOs. Several INGOs reported having had bad experiences in this regard and most include clauses in the MOU they sign with partners that a lack of respect for the Red Cross/INGOs' code of conduct, for instance, is a reason for immediate termination of the contract (IFRC 1994).

The research in Afghanistan confirms the assertion that, overall, local partners enjoy less support from international organisations than do the national/local staffs of those organisations. As one interviewee put it, 'We provided a range of trainings to our staff but the support to partners is more theoretical than real. We are only now looking at the partners not as implementers but as organisations who also need to be supported.' There were, however, some promising signs of greater commitment on the part of some INGOs to build the capacity of their local NGO partners. Several INGOs were praised by their Afghan partners for all of the capacity support they had provided. Others, however, were widely criticised for being too directive and burdensome in their requirements.

In many cases international agencies stated that they would not hand over money or project assets to the local NGO. This was partly due to donor

restrictions, but also to very real concerns regarding the significant pressure this would put on staff in highly resource-depleted environments.

The need for capacity building support for local commercial contractors was generally not raised, as they were deemed to be already capable of implementing the work, and not 'civil society' entities in need of strengthening for social welfare purposes. While understandable, such thinking may lead to negative consequences, as the local contractor will perform the work in its business-as-usual mode, without being guided by the same ethos as the aid agency contracting it. In the past, for example, some commercial contractors payed protection money to local warlords or Taliban commanders. Interestingly, though it was not found to be a broadly representative opinion, one donor representative explained that sometimes they find it more expedient to work with contractors for this reason—being less risk averse than NGOs, they are willing to negotiate with the power holders to get the job done.

The 'Principles of Partnership' endorsed in 2007 by the Global Humanitarian Platform of UN and non-UN humanitarian organisations contains some important broad guidelines for collaboration between international and local, large and small humanitarian providers, and can be a useful starting point for establishing remote management relationships (GHP 2007).

#### **Afghanistan case illustration** Strengthening community outreach

One international NGO has heavily invested in building ties with communities. For this, it created a 'community outreach team' composed of three senior and experienced national staff, including a mullah. The team first worked onto highlighting the similarities between Islamic teachings and the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*. Their work subsequently got the approval from the Ministry for Haj and Religious Affairs as well as influential Islamic scholars.

The team spends most of its times in the field, exchanging views with local shuras and other stakeholders and presenting the organisation's work. In the words of the country director, the team 'explains who we are, why we are not against Islam and signs a MOU with every community, which then contributes to further feedback, transparency, and protection.'

## 4 Key considerations and challenges

### 4.1 Issues of principle in remote management

Maintaining humanitarian principles in violent contexts is a challenge in any operation, and made more so when undertaking a remote management approach. The rise in violence against aid operations in many of the world's current complex political emergencies has prompted calls for a renewed emphasis on the core principles of humanitarianism to enhance the general respect for and security of humanitarian action. Global ideological struggles taking place within these humanitarian emergencies require, many humanitarians argue, that the independence and neutrality of a humanitarian act be respected. The acceptance approach to operational security affirms this notion; however, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and the other highest-risk humanitarian operational environments, it has become quite clear that principles provide no protection against militants seeking proxy targets, and finding easy prey in the largely Western-based humanitarian aid community. In response, some humanitarians are beginning to suggest that perhaps the core principle that needs emphasising in these instances is not independence or neutrality, but rather the *humanitarian imperative*: humanitarian actors must be allowed to get critical assistance through to those who need it, however this can be accomplished. Remote management provides one such pathway; the logic behind it is that homegrown organisations and individuals can achieve acceptance that internationals simply cannot. Even so, others note, the principle of independence—particularly not to receive funding from a donor that is party to the conflict—will still be vital in order to negotiate access.

In Somalia, the more successful remote management projects and local organisations have been able to continue operating by virtue of good community

buy-in, and serious investment in community relations. One organisation makes an effort to not only reach out to local communities and power holders, but also to talk to Somali diaspora populations around the world, providing information on their aid work in Somalia and emphasising its apolitical humanitarian nature. This has worked for different agencies to varying degrees. Another NGO working remotely in Somalia observed that even with warm community relations, they were still vulnerable to threats by armed actors from outside the community over whom the community had no control. In Afghanistan, several interviewees noted that their indirect or direct discussions with local armed opposition groups gained them a degree of acceptance or consent to work in a given area. Most however also indicated that obtaining the endorsement of the 'Pakistani' or 'foreign' Taliban was a difficult, rarely possible task. In any setting, it is clear that without access to the major potential threat sources, local security guarantees will be pointless.

The principle of impartiality comes up frequently as a challenge in regard to remote management. Local staff and partner organisations in contested areas may be inevitably enmeshed in the civil conflict by virtue of their ethnic, religious, or political backgrounds. Local staff or organisations in charge of delivering assistance may have a bias for or against a particular population group that may be hard to avoid; this is a concern for international humanitarian agencies. While the risk is acknowledged, the research found that this aspect had actually not been given much consideration when designing remote arrangements. Some interviewees in Afghanistan reported that they use additional monitoring to mitigate the risk as well as using the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership framework, and/or predefined criteria and selection process.

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## 4.2 Risk transfer: Ethical and liability issues

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The study *Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: Trends in Policy and Operations* (Stoddard, Harmer, and Haver 2006) presented evidence of a rising incidence rate of attacks against national staff in humanitarian operations, relative to their international counterparts. It posited, further, that the rising attack rates for nationals correlated with the increased use of remote management adaptations by international agencies that saw the risk to their international staff becoming too high to remain. The report argued that such decisions were too often based on the erroneous a priori assumption that national and/or local personnel were intrinsically less at risk than internationals; the rising casualty numbers were proving these assumptions wrong. In recent years, humanitarian agencies have become more sophisticated in their appreciation and measurement of risk as a means to guide decision-making in security situations. However, these are complex concepts, and most field offices are not yet capable of applying systematic risk analysis for strategic decision-making, particularly in the heat of volatile situations. There is a particular gap in many agencies' capacity to differentiate the risks for national compared to international staff, and for national compared to local staff, that is, to adequately assess the unique threats faced by different types of locally and nationally hired workers. It is not surprising, therefore, that in Afghanistan the study found a wide variation in perceptions about the risk to local and national staff compared to international staff.

When risks to national and local staff and national partners are underestimated, as the evidence suggests is often the case, what results is a transfer of risk from internationals to nationals or locals—who typically are provided with fewer security resources, materials, and training than their international counterparts (Stoddard, Harmer, and DiDomenico 2009). The risk transfer occurs in both a practical and a legal sense, particularly in programming through partner organisations, as it removes insurance and liability concerns from the agency's equation. At the same time it raises troubling ethical issues, which more and more agencies are beginning to

acknowledge and grapple with. Most field staff would attest that 'duty of care' should be considered to extend beyond immediate (insured) staff, if not in the legal and assuredly in a moral calculus. It is important to remember that international agencies often provide a crucial source of income for their local workers and partners, so must be cognisant that in remote management situations they may be presenting economic opportunities that staff cannot realistically refuse, even if it means taking on a major burden of risk. In Afghanistan various respondents admitted, however, that they were not sure whether the Afghan staff located in remote locations were presenting honest accounts about the actual risks there, for fear of the project being closed down and losing their jobs. Additionally, the risk level to national and local staff may change after the departure of internationals. Perpetrators may start targeting national and local staff in lieu of internationals to achieve the same aims, for instance, to drive the agency out entirely. Alternately, they may see national staff as the next most valuable target.

Unfortunately, examples of practical action and financial investment to significantly boost the security of local staff and partners are hard to find. In Sudan, one NGO reported that it was providing security training to their locally recruited staff in the four locations they were operating in a remote management arrangement, but this was an exception. The Somalia organisations, many of whom operate at great risk and regularly confront security incidents, report that they do not receive resources for security from the 'donors' they work with. Instead, they are told that 'security is the reason we are working with you. Security is your contribution.' This is despite attacks on their staff. This stance seems hard to justify given the security budgets obtained by these agencies for their international staff. Security training provided for local partner organisations is still a rare occurrence, though examples were seen in Afghanistan. A few INGOs have deliberately emphasised the importance of training to increase local partners' capacity. As one country director stated, 'We realised that providing security management training to our local partners would provide them with further capacity to reach

beneficiaries.' Importantly, all Afghans interviewed who had received security training attested to learning a lot from it and strongly encouraged other Afghans to benefit from it where possible.

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### 4.3 Programme quality and effectiveness

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Most agencies interviewed for the study readily acknowledged that shifting to remote management meant accepting an unavoidable lowering of technical sophistication and versatility, as well as for programme monitoring and evaluation standards. Agencies have cited useful methods to mitigate quality deficits, which can be used in combination:

- Establish clear procedures and instructions for monitoring and reporting on activities and progress. These can include, for instance,
  - daily or weekly debriefings,
  - regular written reports, and
  - date-stamped digital photographs of project activities and sites that are uploaded during monitoring visits.
- Maintain regular telephone and email communication between field staff and external managers.
- Bring local personnel out of the area on a regular basis for management, coordination, monitoring reviews, technical discussions, and forward planning.
- Do spot checks, flash visits, and surprise audits.
- Crosscheck and corroborate information with other field contacts.
- Contract a local firm or organisation to monitor and verify the reports.
- Ensure that the intended recipients expect the aid, so that any large diversions are noticed.

One other measure was rarely seen in practice but was cited in hindsight as something that should have been done:

- Conduct prior training/capacity building of locals for programme implementation, reporting, security, etc., **before** remote management arrangements take effect.

A representative of a major international agency with experience in both Afghanistan and Somalia who was interviewed for this study attested to cases where some local NGOs that were given capacity building training ended up doing considerably better at meeting programme outputs and quality goals than did the international NGOs; these were revealed in the evaluation process.

Because it is technically easier to implement and report on, remote management programs tend to emphasise direct delivery of material assistance. As aid programming in the setting becomes stripped of its more technical and innovative features, its time horizons narrow and it loses the long view with regard to objectives. Another aspect of the remote management 'trap' or 'rut', a number of humanitarian practitioners revealed, is that remote management generally inclines toward a status quo level of programming,

As mentioned, the less tangible and more complex sectors of humanitarian action, such as protection and advocacy activities, are difficult and challenging for the humanitarian community in the best of situations. Under remote management, they become nearly impossible to attempt. Afghanistan interviewees generally agreed that, beyond Kabul, protection activities suffered from remote management arrangements as such processes depended on the presence of international staff; local NGOs could not hope to carry the same weight and influence in their advocacy as did their international counterparts. For the internationals who have shifted to remote management, their humanitarian advocacy role is similarly compromised, since the legitimacy of humanitarian actors' advocacy agendas is directly related to their on-the-ground presence and first-hand information of conditions and contextual developments (Stoddard 2006).

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### 4.4 Logistics and communications

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The logistical and communications challenges of operating remotely have spurred some international agencies to invest heavily in logistics capacity and to elevate the logistician position to the senior staff



level. Maintaining adequate logistical infrastructure within the remote management area is, of course, critical for effective operations; however, international agencies will be inclined to take their physical assets with them when they pull out (and in fact may believe they are compelled to do so by donor requirements). In Sri Lanka, the international staff of the evacuating agency was instructed by the authorities to take their assets with them, but instead decided, at some risk, to leave communications equipment with their local staff, in opposition to the government's desire for an information blockade. In addition, they left their local staff with all available cash on hand.

Agencies reported using the usual technologies to communicate with their colleagues or partners on the field: mobile phones, email, Voice over Internet Protocols (VoIPs) such as Skype or MSN, HF and VHF radios, and satellite phones.<sup>8</sup> The use of these technologies differs from one organisation to the other, with some tools being used more than others. The language barrier naturally becomes more challenging in remote communication than it is in person; this was identified by many respondents as a particular constraint. Despite many commonly cited problems, however, a great many agencies lack an internal communications protocol. For instance, one INGO interviewee found that it was helpful to follow a regular procedure for remote communication whereby she first sent by email an agenda of the topics to be discussed by phone/VoIP and afterward shared in writing the main points of the discussion. The advantages and overall time saved and misunderstandings aborted by this simple measure made up for the inconvenience and extra time spent doing the writing up.

Many humanitarian agencies observe that remote management means a serious reduction in the real-time field-level information they enjoyed when they were present in the location. Communications with local staff and partners provide a narrow keyhole view at best. One innovative approach

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<sup>8</sup> More information on the promises and risks of digital technology can be found here: Security Management Initiative, 'Cyber Security for International Aid Agencies: A Primer,' *SMI Professional Development Brief* 3, 2009.

has been developed by the NGO Coordinating Committee in Iraq (a consortium of sixty-seven mostly international NGOs running aid programmes inside Iraq by remote management and other means). NCCI's 'field focal point network' consists of twenty-four local NGOs located all across the country. For their role in the network, these organisations gather and monitor information on humanitarian, security, and political conditions in their localities. NCCI provides ongoing training to the focal point organisations on how to collect and disseminate the information, and who to reach out to. The international NGOs, many of whom still operate remotely out of Amman, benefit from the first-hand ground-level information on humanitarian needs and the evolving security situation on the ground in all eighteen regions of the country. For their part, the national NGOs benefit from increased understanding of international humanitarian issues and their role in the system; they also get information from the other regions and from the national level that they would not normally receive. The network also allows them to exchange experience and knowledge with each other; it provides them with training in advocacy on international humanitarian law and human rights. While the immediate benefits of this arrangement accrue to the current humanitarian response agencies, the network has an additional objective of civil society empowerment.

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#### 4.5 Coordination

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Remote management can pose significant challenges to the coordination of humanitarian action, although in some instances there are opportunities to be gained as well. The establishment of the cluster approach in late 2005 introduced a more predictable and accountable means of coordination by formalising the lead role among particular agencies and organisations in each sector. Cluster leads are responsible not only for the performance of their own programme but also for the entire sectoral response. While this is a welcome and radical departure from previous models of coordination, it becomes somewhat problematic in highly insecure contexts if the cluster lead agency no longer has

a presence in the field. Despite the now very interdependent nature of the cluster approach, security management approaches to implementing sectoral activities (such as undertaking a collective risk assessment for the sector or assessing the issue of risk transfer to partners) have not been considered a part of the cluster lead's responsibilities. More recently, however, agencies are beginning to recognise that the cluster lead's role is to ensure that the sector functions both effectively and *securely*. UNICEF and UNHCR both noted in interviews that the issue was of concern and that they were seeking to develop lessons learned from the field to inform future practice. These included looking at specific programming challenges and the need to break programmes down into operational activities such as design, delivery, and monitoring in terms of criticality and prioritisation.

In contexts like Somalia, where all coordination and much of the programme planning is undertaken in Nairobi, being absent from the ground does not have quite the same implication as it does in contexts like Afghanistan and Sudan. In Nairobi, the ability to coordinate amongst all stakeholders offers agencies one of the few benefits of operating remotely. For agencies used to a more autonomous approach, however, remote management coordination arrangements can feel constricting. One large NGO with multiple affiliates has centralised programme decision-making in Pakistan into just one office that operates using semi-remote management. While they deem the centralisation necessary, for security reasons, they find that their actions and response times have slowed considerably now that each affiliate cannot act independently but must run everything through a management bottleneck.

At the field level, coordination between agencies being managed remotely decline rapidly once the international staff, who are typically responsible for coordination tasks, are removed. National and local personnel are often either unaware of coordination activities or are uncomfortable participating if it is not something they had been involved in prior to the remote management adaptation.

A different concern raised by interviewees was the inter-agency pressure to speak with one voice and present a unified picture to stakeholders and donors on issues of remote management. As one agency noted, 'There's not always great value in taking a unified approach because we often won't agree with how others are operating—extremes are more stark in Somalia than elsewhere in terms of how agencies are operating.' Agencies agree that sharing information about security is critical, but taking a unified position is not always possible because they do not want the safety and security of staff to be compromised by agencies that are taking more risks or programming in a way that is not in the best interests of the beneficiaries. Generally, interviewees argued that there was a more of a tendency to 'go it alone' in a remote management set up than in a more regular programme set up.

In the context of Afghanistan, coordination was seen to be more effective at the provincial level, in part due to the existence of a number of relevant coordination organisations, such as OCHA, ANSO, ACBAR, and the (governmental) Provincial Disaster Management Committees. However, these coordination forums were rarely linked to the international (Kabul-based) coordination mechanisms. In addition, Afghan NGOs were less involved in coordination mechanisms; this was particularly problematic where local NGOs undertake a larger share of the burden of programming in remote management situations.

Donor coordination can also affect the success of remote management practices; the lack of dialogue between donors, particularly since their operations are so politically driven, often influenced the overall ability of agencies to conduct remote management operations effectively. This was often the case when projects had funding from multiple donors having very different requirements in terms of standards, monitoring, and reporting.

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## 4.6 Accountability

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Finding a reasonable way to ensure accountability while accepting that quality and programme

standards may drop has been paramount in programme decision-making for remote management. Some note that being able to monitor and evaluate the relevancy, quality, and impact of remotely managed projects is its single most challenging aspect. For the most part, in terms of reporting and monitoring systems, the focus continues to be on upwards accountability towards donors, not downwards to beneficiaries.

Globally, downwards accountability to beneficiaries has received greater attention of late. The Humanitarian Accountability Project's (HAP) annual survey found a perceived improvement in accountability to beneficiaries in recent years (HAP 2008). However, in many disaster contexts, too few people know what they are entitled to receive, or how to complain if they do not get it, and are unable actively and meaningfully to participate in the planning and delivery of assistance (Harvey, Stoddard, Harmer and Taylor 2010). In remote management contexts, this challenge is made that much greater because opportunities to communicate and engage with beneficiary populations may be severely limited, depending on the implementing actor. In addition, in some contexts there is a lack of an accountability culture within the government and civil society; efforts to improve accountability through national actors, including local authorities and national NGOs, may actually be seen as a political challenge.

Agencies recognize, however, that downwards accountability mechanisms, such as transparency over entitlements or community monitoring and systems for complaints redress, can be especially informative and useful not only to ensure that the goals of the programme are being met, but also to address implementation issues during the programming process. In the North Caucasus, the Danish Refugee Council has implemented successful beneficiary complaints procedures for food distribution (Willitts-King and Harvey 2005). In Afghanistan, an NGO working in food security communicates about the food distribution in advance, including the type and amount of food as well as the specific target groups, to the Community Development Council (CDC),

a community-based organisation at the local level. The CDC shares the responsibility to control the distribution of food. In another case, communities actively participate in *designing* the data collection tools and share the findings; this encourages community-based monitoring.

Other monitoring exercises include investing in a process of cross checking and triangulation, which may be complemented by flash visits by international or senior national staff. A number of organisations noted that they focus on the gross outputs instead of accounting for everything individually, and accept that some will go astray. Monitoring remotely also depends on the national/local capacity and establishing the technological means to verify whether the work has been done. In Somalia, for example, national staff or partners can use mobile phones to take pictures of their programmes, upload them, and send them to staff in Nairobi. In Afghanistan, an organisation has developed a GIS-based monitoring programme via an internet database that allows extensive storage of photos, mapping, basic data crosschecking, and access from any internet-based location. It allows superimposing project activities on satellite imagery and a Web mapping interface. In contrast, in Darfur, Sudan, agencies note that communication technology simply is not there in the way it is in other remote management contexts; national staff therefore has little experience of working in such a way. It was also noted that not all projects lend themselves to such documentation, such as those where the outputs are not evident or tangible.

Formal monitoring at the point of project or programme completion is undertaken in a range of ways. M&E may be done by an organisation's project staff as part of the (remote) project management cycle or by the headquarters' monitoring and evaluation or quality assurance unit. The scope of work varies, ranging from a limited focus on programme indicators to a more comprehensive approach such as reviewing and auditing the project, talking to beneficiaries, contractors, shuras, etc., and providing support to the project team. Independent consultants, consulting companies, community



feedback mechanisms, and local authorities are also used to undertake monitoring work.

An international NGO working in Afghanistan has had success using ‘beneficiary reference groups’ within their remote management strategy. The group of beneficiaries provides direct feedback and critique on the programme and quality of delivery. The same INGO is exploring the idea of peer monitoring across the national staffs of different INGOs working in the same insecure area.

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#### 4.7 Fundraising and donor relations

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The major humanitarian donors’ approach to financing in highly insecure contexts where remote management adaptations are often employed is a complex one. Donors have shown repeatedly that they are willing to be flexible on providing additional funding and loosening monitoring requirements when security conditions change but, overall, their approach could be described as being hands-off. This is due partly to deference and a reluctance to micromanage their partners. Indeed, most donor agencies do not have operational field capacity and correctly assume that their operational partners will have a better grasp of the sometimes-rapidly changing programming and security needs (Stoddard and Harmer 2010). However, it is also fair to say that, to some degree, donors have deliberately kept their distance from commenting on remote management adaptations because of possible liability issues.

Donor interviewees noted that they are open to accepting limitations and changes to programming resulting from clear threats to security of staff. In one instance, when an agency operating in Darfur could not use the project vehicles that the donor had paid for because of a surge in car jacking, the donor made allowances for them to rent local vehicles. In another instance, however, an agency left behind their donor-purchased vehicles and radios for partners to use, but the donor questioned the decision because it was unclear whether the donor was legally entitled to let its partners do this.

One example of good donor practice, as recognised by agencies, was the decision of one donor to deploy seasoned remote-management specialists to current contexts where adaptations were occurring. This allowed for a better understanding between the donor and agency in terms of the models of operation and the costs of operating. It also ensured cross fertilisation of good practices and lessons learned.

For their part, agencies note that they are constantly challenged by donors on two issues: costs and maintaining an international presence. Although donors accept the often-higher costs, they continue to question certain budget lines, particularly for logistics and staff travel costs, which are significant in remote management operations. One NGO calculated that for every \$1 million emergency project there would be approx \$40 thousand in regular flights alone (in order to fly staff in and out of Somalia); this did not include unforeseen travel. Other higher costs include additional communications equipment, training, and protective and deterrence mechanisms, such as armed or unarmed guards.

On the issue of an international presence, most donors want internationals to oversee programmes. This is primarily in order to monitor the programmes and ensure cost effectiveness in delivery. Although in some cases donors are willing to reduce monitoring and evaluation requirements in situations of high insecurity, a programme that cannot be effectively monitored is unlikely to attract sustained donor interest, and future fundraising may be difficult.

Agencies also note the problem of unpredictability in determining and budgeting for their security needs; they often continue to operate in a reactive manner, upgrading security provisions based on the most recent event. This can add to the challenges donors face in adequately budgeting and establishing their own policy frameworks flexibly enough to cater to the changing needs identified by agencies on the ground.

Generally, local NGOs and other community-based groups do not receive funding from international

donor governments. This is due to a trend among these donor governments to try to reduce administrative costs and increase accountability to their publics, with the net result that rules regarding funding recipients are even less flexible than before (Harvey, Stoddard, Harmer, and Taylor 2010). As one NGO noted, ‘Donors channeling greater and greater levels of funding works against LINGO funding—because it’s too big for them to digest and program.’ In Afghanistan, donors’ choice of organisations to receive funds is often based on existing capacity—which then naturally excludes most Afghan NGOs and further contributes to using these mainly as service providers for international agencies. That said, there are some instances in which local NGOs have received funds from multilateral allocations. Willits-King (2007) notes that in DRC the pooled fund has played a valuable role in providing significant funding to local NGOs—\$3.3 million to thirteen organisations. In Somalia, LINGOs previously excluded from funding relationships between donors and agencies have been included in the Somalia Humanitarian Response Fund. In Sudan, by contrast, \$418,000 to two LINGOs made up a tiny proportion of the funding and local NGOs were excluded by heavy administrative and coordination requirements and the weight of the work plan process (Harvey, Stoddard, Harmer, and Taylor 2010).

Finally, agencies note that there are, on occasion, pressures to continue programming in insecure operational contexts, both a perceived political pressure from donors and an internal pressure to work in environments where international support to the beneficiaries is vital—and donor financing is readily available. One NGO interviewee noted that this pressure sometimes comes from local staff, which sees both the welfare of their fellow inhabitants and their own livelihoods at stake in the decision. The fact that most agencies lack well-defined risk thresholds and exit strategies to guide decision-making aggravates the difficulties created by these external and internal pressures.

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## 4.8 Local perceptions and acceptance

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One of the biggest concerns of agencies operating by remote management is the impact it has on their acceptance strategies, as well as their ability to maintain the perception of neutrality and impartiality. Increasing distance from and a growing mistrust on the part of the local, and even the beneficiary, population can happen for multiple reasons. First, agencies may choose to increase protection and deterrence measures (such as establishing heavily guarded compounds) in line with the deteriorating conditions. Second, agencies will struggle to maintain a dialogue with local actors, including armed actors who previously provided security guarantees, because of reduced staff presence on the ground and, possibly, reduced staff travel and movement outside the project site. This is despite the fact that changing the programmatic approach usually requires more communication rather than less. As one agency pointed out, the corollary of this is also true—it is virtually impossible to start a remote management project from zero. Finally, national staff often comes under significant pressure from local actors, especially if they are perceived to have decision-making authority over the projects resources and assets. For one agency in Darfur, Sudan, visits by international staff to project sites are a critical component of maintaining their operations. During those visits, international staff attempt to have regular contact with the local authorities and other actors to explain that although the programme is slightly different, the goals remain the same. In Somalia, one NGO relying on national staff to directly implement their projects trains staff intensively on humanitarian principles, as well as the NGO’s mandate and the goals of the programme. The NGO sees this as imperative given that the national staff does most of the negotiation regarding access with various parties to the conflict; they want this to be done in a way that is acceptable and that does not compromise the organisation. The NGO believes that this has enhanced their overall access.

Another challenge identified in Afghanistan was the perception created by heavily guarded internationals

arriving on monitoring visits to project sites. In one instance, a private security company was sent ahead of the internationals in order to ‘secure the site’ and the expatriates were flown in by helicopter. In another, international staff was protected by soldiers from the international coalition. In another scenario, donors visiting the project site for monitoring came in armoured vehicles with armed guards. While

such mechanisms may provide protection to the visitors, they create distance between the community and the international staff. In the case in which international staff was protected by soldiers from the international coalition, the local workers may have been endangered if they were seen to be working for an international organisation that collaborates with international forces.

## 5 Conclusions

**The lack of policy and operational guidance on remote management as a humanitarian programming strategy makes for more difficult implementation and, often, poorer outcomes and adds to the workload of all parties to the arrangement.** The findings on Afghanistan and other humanitarian operational settings clearly indicate that, most often, the decision to shift to remote management is reactive rather than strategic, reflecting a last-ditch effort as opposed to a considered contingency arrangement. Some agencies have begun to develop planning and implementation guidance, but it is still in an embryonic stage. The process has largely been bottom-up, driven by staffers in the field who have expressed a strong need for it. The appropriate design for remote management in a given context will be dictated by local conditions and needs, and cannot be confined to a single headquarters-driven template. Nevertheless, field staffers have called for some overall organisational policy guidance. Ideally, this guidance would take a holistic approach and reflect how all organisational policies (HR, finance, communications, programme, evaluation) relate to remotely managed programming and how they would need to be adjusted. Such guidance would not only assist in the practical implementation of remote management, but would also have a positive impact on outcomes. **In remote management**

**arrangements, programme quality expectations may need to be adjusted down, but standards can and should be higher than they are currently.**

In many places, the programme goals should be similar, if not equal, to those in other, non-remote, management programmes in the country. It is not acceptable for agencies to take the position that aid in any form is better than not channeling aid at all.

**Although considered a strictly temporary measure, some remote management operations have stretched into years, and certain aspects can become self-perpetuating.** The absence of strategic planning and long-term objectives for remote management settings, combined with a loss of perspective on and familiarity with the locality by the international entities, were seen to create a status quo mindset, hampering programme innovation and contributing to inertia. **Incorporating an ‘exit strategy’ or transition planning in remote management guidance could assist agencies in breaking out of the remote management rut and thinking more long term about humanitarian goals in the setting.**

**National and local staff and partner entities in remote management arrangements continue to receive an inadequate level of training and resource support for their roles.** While agency

personnel have increasing awareness of the need to provide better and more equitable duty of care to national and local staff, they nearly universally admit that they have a long way to go in this regard. The efforts of some agencies to increase access by their staff to training and insurance arrangements are small steps in the right direction. In terms of local partner organisations, however, there is more of a gap to bridge. The research highlighted that local organisations and remote management operations are primarily used and treated as service providers rather than partners. However, in Afghanistan and elsewhere the argument is made that international agencies have a responsibility to these organisations that goes beyond their immediate programming arrangement to the security of their staff in the longer term development of the civil society sector and capacity for local humanitarian response.

**The most successful examples of remote management that this research found involved coordination structures that were rooted in the**

**local context, with the potential for building ongoing and sustainable local capacity in humanitarian action.** The creation of internal *shuras* or remotely managed programmes in Afghanistan and the informational network of field focal points among local NGOs in Iraq are promising examples of remote management adaptations that have led to innovative coordination structures that stand to benefit local civil society regardless of the presence of international actors. In addition, the few cases in which international agencies provided security training and security resources to local partner organisations in the setting are still the rare exceptions, but point the way forward. The effect of the current status quo is not simply that programming quality inevitably suffers but, more importantly, leads to the conclusion **that international agencies, by transferring security risks, are not living up to their ethical responsibilities toward their local partners.**

## 6 Guidelines for improving remote management

The following are options for developing more strategic, principled, and effective approaches to the access dilemma.

- **Plan for remote management.** In highly insecure contexts, consider the option of remote management programming during the design phase of a regular programme and contingency planning exercises. This should include consideration of the type of programme, the scale and the sectoral focus, and the role of international and national staff, possible partnering entities, and the ‘exit strategy’/ transition options. Having checklists, documents, and procedures in place that can be quickly utilized assists in the transition to remote

management in the event of an incident that requires it.

- **Adopt a long-term view.** The programme’s strategic direction and the support services that will be needed should be considered in the medium to long term, not just the short term. Issues of further diminishing access and possible programme closure should be a part of this.
- **Develop practical and policy guidance in relevant field offices and organisation-wide.** A two-pronged (field and headquarters) approach to developing guidelines is warranted. A contextualised policy at the field level is vital—how to manage a remote operation will

depend on the specific context and needs. At the same time, all field offices would benefit from a universal set of policies stipulating how the organisation's systems and policies function in remote management scenarios and from general policy guidance that reflects the organisation's mission and values.

- **Invest in relationships with local staff, partners, and community authorities prior to shifting to remote management.** The more successful examples of remotely managed programmes have a strong local capacity-building component. Prior investment should include analysing and addressing possible skills development, training, and mentoring needs. Involving the community in all aspects of programming, including monitoring, will both empower beneficiaries and increase third-party monitoring of the programme in terms of quality and completeness.
- **Recruit international staff that has experience in remote management** or distance management contexts and in working with changing conditions for access, as well as has strong communication and distance management skills, local language skills, and, possibly, some development programming experience. Ideally, international staff would be recruited on long-term contracts so that relationships with local staff can be developed and so that they acquire a strong knowledge of the context.
- **Cost out potential remote management contingencies.** To the extent possible, identify possible security, logistics, and communications

needs for remote management during the regular programme design and planning process so that these costs can be quickly budgeted for if operations need to shift to remote management.

- **Avoid risk transfer as a policy priority in remote management.** The issue of risk transfer needs to be better understood and considered—agencies should consider conducting joint risk assessments with partner entities and mutually determining their security management structure and additional security needs. Risk assessments could also be coordinated and conducted at the cluster level to examine sector level coverage and identify possible gaps.
- **Coordinate policy development and share lessons learned among agencies and donors.** While it is appropriate for individual agencies to develop their own remote management guidelines in accordance with their organisational policies, it should not occur in complete isolation. Agencies, together with donor governments, could seek opportunities and platforms for sharing information, policy templates, and good practices in remote management. Where donors have an operational presence, humanitarian agencies benefit from inviting donor staff with previous experience in remote management programming to work in similar contexts in order to share knowledge and manage programmatic and funding issues.

A checklist of basic criteria and key principles that might contribute to guiding agencies in their decision-making, can identify important issues, as shown in Table 2.



**Table 2 Guide for Decision Making**

Guiding Principles	Issues
Risks to national/local staff or partners are properly assessed and mitigated.	<p>Does your risk assessment indicate that the individuals who will be carrying out your program will not themselves be assuming an unacceptable level of risk?</p> <p>Are they equipped with adequate financial and material resources for their security?</p>
Local networks and contacts are well-established before shifting to remote management.	<p>Does your agency have prior capacity for in-situ support of the program (whether implemented by local staff or partner organisation), including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• capable and trusted staff or partners;</li> <li>• professional contacts with authorities, local businesses, organisations, and community leaders;</li> <li>• familiarity and acceptance by the local community (if they are not the threat sources) for what you are doing; and</li> <li>• functioning supply lines and logistical requirements for your program?</li> </ul>
The local environment and context are well understood and information can be kept current.	<p>Does staff possess a good understanding of the situation and players in the locality, or has this been hindered by staff turnover or recent arrival of the agency in the country?</p> <p>Can you maintain reliable sources of information in addition to your direct staff/partners?</p>
Systems are in place to ensure clear and consistent management.	<p>Have you established communication protocols, reporting systems, and monitoring procedures that enhance verification and accountability, minimize misunderstandings, and maintain a consistent approach (despite turnover of international staff)?</p> <p>Has this been done in a way that does not make local staff or partners feel distrusted or incapable, and allows for a regular expression of appreciation for their efforts?</p>
Accountability is both upwards and downwards.	<p>Have you discussed monitoring and evaluation needs with the donor/s from the outset of the remote management phase?</p> <p>Are monitoring options utilizing all possible communications technology? Are they practical, given possible movement constraints of staff? Does the project lend itself to technical documentation?</p> <p>Are there means to work with host communities and beneficiaries to establish monitoring systems for tracking the delivering and assessing the impact of aid? Do they include a complaints mechanism?</p>

# Annex 1. Tearfund Afghanistan: Remote Management ‘Shura System’

Remote monitoring depends on the following:

## Regular communication

- Cell phone, email, Skype
- Digital photos used to verify project progress

## Regulated authority

- Monthly, appointment of an Officer In Charge (OIC) for the test period. After assessment by peers, the Area Coordinator makes the final decision to appoint a permanent OIC.
- Formation of Tearfund Kandahar Shura. This is composed of five senior staff (Office Coordinator, Disaster Risk Reduction Project Manager, Public Health Education Project Manager, HR and Finance Administrator, Program Information and Community Liaison Officer).
- The shura meet regularly and share accountability and responsibility for decision-making in Kandahar while being remotely managed by Area Coordinator in Kabul.

## Reporting strategy

- Project Manager’s Weekly Progress Report to Area Coordinator
- Senior Staff Weekly Report

There are a number of strategic programming choices that need to be made during remote management, including the following:

- Undertake fewer infrastructure programmes because of the insecurity of static locations during construction and the inability to closely monitor quality.
- Invest in the capacity and resources of central Finance and Logistics sections to deal with the field documentation.

- Budget for additional security resources, including specific training for managers, acceptable risk programming, and protection measures in offices/compounds.

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## Positive features of the shura system

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1. The shura system fits well into the cultural context of the Afghan society where major discussions happen and decisions are made.
2. The shura discusses issues and makes sure that different views are heard—especially helpful as the Afghan society is highly tribal; e.g., Pashtuns have different sub-tribes. Even though the Senior Management Team members who compose the shura are all educated, the sub-tribal interplay affects the everyday dynamics of the office. The shura system controls the balance between the dynamics.
3. There is increased prevention of fraud. The traditional office set up has one person for final decision-making; however, the shura system provides a check and balance for decision-making, especially for project and finance management.
4. The shura system provides a weekly interaction among shura members. Financial, logistical, and activities support are discussed; this is particularly helpful in planning vehicle movement for the week.
5. The shura system lightens the load as responsibilities are shared. This reduces possible burnout of a project manager and there is strong evidence of increased productivity.
6. Information can be collected and verified not just from one person but also from all members of the shura.

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## Challenging aspects of the shura system

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1. The need for one person at the top of the hierarchy is brought up on a regular basis especially from the 'stronger' or 'dominant' sub-tribes. Though the traditional Afghan shura is well known in the country, it is always led by a powerful leader. Unlike the Afghan shura, the Tearfund shura shares responsibilities.
2. It takes time for the shura to function as a real council or a team because they come from different sub-tribes of the bigger Pashtun tribe. As a result of this dynamic, it takes time for the shura members to become a cohesive body.
3. Decision-making is slower (because each member expresses their personal views on matters discussed) and it takes a skill on the part of the Area Coordinator to assess if the decisions made are a consensus of the shura.

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## Recommendations

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1. In selecting the office coordinator role (the one who facilitates the meeting of the shura), give each shura member a turn to be the Shura Coordinator. This system provides a way to choose among the shura members who will fill in the role as office coordinator and to have the experience of being a shura leader.
2. The shura system was borne out of a working knowledge of the culture of the people. It is important and particularly helpful for managers to know and understand the culture.
3. As a remote manager, regular phone contact and visits to the project site are important. Equally, every quarter the senior managers should visit the Kabul office (for face-to-face catch up).
4. Weekly reporting on a prepared template for recording/documenting purposes is useful.
5. Immediate decision making on the part of the remote manager on matters of importance is absolutely necessary.

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## Annex 3. Persons interviewed

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### Global

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Mohamed Mealen Abakare, Executive Director, Humanitarian Action for Relief and Development Organisation (HARDO), Somalia

Kate Alley, Manager, Knowledge Management, Humanitarian Policy Section, UNICEF

Shawn Bardwell, Safety and Security Coordinator, USAID Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance

Oliver Behn, Executive Coordinator, European Interagency Security Forum

Kumar B. Chandiramani, Head of Mission, Somalia Programs, Médecins Sans Frontières Operational Centre Brussels

Vance Culbert, UN Representative, Norwegian Refugee Council, New York

Federica D'Andregiovanni, Humanitarian Affairs Officer, Coordination Response Division, OCHA New York

Sophie Delaunay, Executive Director, Médecins Sans Frontières USA

Anthony Val Flynn, Security Coordinator, European Commission Humanitarian Office

Susannah Friedman, Emergencies Director, Somalia Programme, Save the Children UK

Martin Gallagher, First Secretary, Geneva Mission, Government of Ireland

Sylvain Groulx, Head of Mission, Darfur, Sudan, Médecins Sans Frontières Spain

Tim Holmes Programme Director, North Sudan Programme, Tearfund

Representative, International Committee of the Red Cross

Hassan Khaire, Country Director for Somalia and Kenya, Norwegian Refugee Council

Anar Mamdani, International Humanitarian Assistance Directorate, Canadian International Development Agency

Fyras Mawazini, Executive Coordinator, NCCI (NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq)

Christopher McLaughlin, formerly Norwegian Refugee Council, Sri Lanka

Isabelle Mouniaman, Desk Officer (Iraq), Médecins Sans Frontières France

Ivor Morgan, formerly Medair, Sudan

Mads Oyen, Humanitarian Policy Section, UNICEF

Robert Painter, Humanitarian Security Adviser, United Nations Department for Safety and Security

Christine Persaud, Program Officer, Strategic Analysis and Planning Unit, Canadian International Development Agency

Simon Springett, Oxfam GB, Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the Commonwealth of Independent States

Hannah Tijmes, Head of Humanitarian Aid Department/Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands

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## Afghanistan

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G.B. Adikhari, Country Director, Action Aid

Meenakshi Batra, Country Director, SC UK

Catherine Bowen, Deputy Programme Director, Tearfund

Dennis Dahlman, Programme Director, Shelter Now International

Isabelle D'Hault, Head of Office/Technical Adviser, ECHO

Gulru Dokhudoeva, Director, Partnership, Development, and Advocacy, Afghan Aid

Anders Fange, Country Director, Swedish Committee Afghanistan

Zeenat Gareval, Country Director, ACTED

Lydia Geirsdottir, Humanitarian Reform Officer, Humanitarian Reform, CARE

Sara Gustafsson, Counsellor, Country Manager for Development, SIDA

Esmatullah Haidary, Deputy Managing Director, ADA

Wael Haj-Ibrahim, Head of Office, OCHA

Michiel Hofman, Country Representative, MSF

Sebastien Hogan, Director, ANSO

Dean Homleid, Country Director, IRD

Fazlul Hoque, Country Head, BRAC

Fazel Jalil, Deputy Country Director, Save the Children Sweden

Jamshed, Acting Country Director, Islamic Relief

Amanullah Jawad, Deputy Director, NPO/RRAA

Bob Kitchen, Country Director, IRC

Shah Liton, Country Director, Oxfam-Novib

Ben Mascal, Country Director, Merlin  
Fiona McLysaght, Country Director, Concern  
Christine Mulligan, Country Director, Mercy Corps  
Dr. Sahaq, Country Director, Ibn Sina  
Laurent Saillard, Director, ACBAR  
Dr. Saljuqi and Dr. Ahmad Mudessir ‘Rasuli’,  
Director, Monitoring and Evaluation Manager,  
Shashwat Saraf, Head of Mission, Action contre la  
Faim

Reto Stocker, Head of Delegation, ICRC  
Carl F. Taestensen, Chief Security Advisor, GTZ  
Joop Teeuwen, Country Director, ZOA  
Michael Torreano, Field Programme Officer, PRT  
Ghazni, USAID  
Lynn Yoshikawa, Humanitarian Policy and Advocacy  
Specialist, Oxfam GB

## Annex 4. Research matrix and interview framework

### Terms of Reference for field research

#### Lessons learned from remote management programming adaptations in highly insecure areas

June 2009

Humanitarian Outcomes in collaboration with the Center on International Cooperation and Praxis is undertaking a focused study to identify issues and best practices in remote management—an operational programming adaptation by humanitarian agencies in response to increasing insecurity. Remote management programming has the important benefit of allowing operations to continue, but it creates a number of challenges as well. These include constraints to efficient and quality service delivery; difficulties maintaining a strategic programme and planning focus; and the risk of corruption and accountability concerns. It also transfers the security risks on the assumption that local actors face a lower level of risk than international entities or personnel. This assumption is frequently false, however, and simply shifts the burden of risk to local staff and partners who often have fewer security resources and less training.

A number of agencies working in highly insecure settings have identified the significant challenges and practical dilemmas inherent in the remote management arrangement, and have called for additional information and analytical input on the topic. This study aims to address these demands. Specifically, the study will examine trends in contexts such as Iraq, Sudan, Somalia and Afghanistan. A field study will be conducted in Afghanistan, as the most feasible of the four contexts for the field research to take place.

#### 1. Aims of the field research

The purpose of the field research is to document and analyse the use of remote management by aid agencies. The research consultant will be hosted by the Afghanistan offices of one or more collaborating NGOs during a 10-day field visit for ground level interviewing and observational research.

At the end of the assignment the consultant will submit a case study on the relevant practices among aid providers in that country. Specifically, the consultant will undertake the following activities:

- Pre-trip planning and programming of in country meetings and interviews in consultation with the project managers and the hosting organisation(s)
- Preparation of case-study methodology and framework
- Interviewing of INGO, LNGO, UN, ICRC, and other relevant aid actors
- Collection of organization documentation pertaining to remote management policies and practices
- Reviewing and inputting to the final report, as third author

The research objective is to document the use of remote management as a security adaptation, scoping and describing the practice as it has been used by aid organisations in Afghanistan in response to declining security. The consultant will interview the organisations employing the practice as well as the local staff and/or local partners that have assumed programming responsible (as feasible). Research questions will include:

- 1) What criteria or triggering event(s) led to the decision to use a remote management strategy? To what extent was it guided by organisation policy or protocols? (Collect policy documentation on the practice as it exists)
- 2) What are the different types and approaches to the practice seen among aid providers in Afghanistan, and what are the strengths, weaknesses, and potential hazards of each?
- 3) Are there any innovative approaches or strategies used that might provide useful lessons to aid actors in other insecure settings?
- 4) How are local entities identified and chosen as ‘implementing partners’ in remote management scenarios? What are they provided by the transferring agency in terms of programming expertise and security inputs (e.g. training and/or equipment)?
- 5) Is there a stated duration for the practice of remote management, and does this differ between agencies? What is the criteria for ending the practice and how will this be measured?
- 6) How is risk assessed for the local entities assuming programming responsibilities? What is their perception of their own risk?
- 7) Determine the percentage of program portfolio (organisations/projects) employing remote management, and the percent change from previous years; and map where this is occurring in Afghanistan

## **2. Process**

It is anticipated that the study will be completed by November 30 and will take approximately 23 days in total. This includes preparing the field visit, collecting and analyzing relevant documentation/policy papers, traveling to the region, conducting face-to-face interviews, drafting and finalising the background paper and recommendations, and inputting on the draft full report.

The consultant should submit a draft study framework and methodology to the research team by September 20 for approval, with a view to commencing the research by October 1.

## **3. Consultant requirements**

- Prior field experience in humanitarian programming and security management
- Familiarity with Afghanistan and the key actors in the humanitarian and aid community more broadly
- Prior experience in performing evaluations or assessments

#### 4. Field research framework

Actor interviewed	Expat staff NGO	National staff INGO	Local NGO	Local/int'l contractor	Other civil society actor	Local gov't	Donor	ICRC	UN agency	Other, as relevant
Topic studied										
Triggering events	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	
The design of a RM strategy	X	X	X				X	X	X	
Protocol & Policies	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	
Identification of local actor	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Support to local actor	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Personnel management	X	X	X					X	X	
Security risk management	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Implementation of RM projects	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Financial & Logistical considerations	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Monitoring & Evaluation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Communication considerations	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Donor policies and practices	X	X	X				X		X	
Place of humanitarian principles & values	X	X	X				X	X	X	
Coordination & collective implications	X	X	X				X	X	X	
Protection considerations	X	X	X				X	X	X	



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