



The Operations
Partnership

Remote Management: Meeting Operational Challenges



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Current context

The scope and delivery of humanitarian assistance has changed considerably in recent years. Civilian need has dramatically risen, as demonstrated by the increasing numbers of people displaced within or outside their countries of origin or trapped in besieged or hard-to-reach areas.¹ This has led to a significant growth in humanitarian operations, including a six-fold increase in official humanitarian funding, from the beginning of the 1990s to 2010.² The current architecture of international humanitarian law, conceived following World War II, is under significant pressure. A recent review of humanitarian operations in inaccessible conflict settings noted qualitative changes in the nature of conflicts requiring humanitarian aid, including an increase in length and complexity: conflict is ever more protracted and accessibility is becoming a growing issue.³ Moreover, the traditional risks of working in conflict settings are being exacerbated in some current conflicts by a reduced recognition of the neutrality of humanitarian aid workers by conflict parties, including an increase in the number of attacks on aid workers, and the specific targeting of doctors and medical personnel.⁴

This evolution has compromised the 'humanitarian space' in which aid workers operate and put increasing pressure on aid agencies to develop more sophisticated analyses of complex crises, more robust risk mitigation measures, and stronger donor oversight requirements. In response to this new reality, the aid community has continually sought to increase its skills set and competencies, so as to be better equipped to face these constant and evolving challenges. To continue delivery of life-saving humanitarian assistance in access-constrained and insecure environments, agencies are increasingly using a variety of operational modalities that expose fewer staff to high-risk contexts. These are generically known as remote management.

This article, based on the experience and learning of The Operations Partnership (OP) during work in support of the Global Health Cluster and three key NGOs, outlines some key issues faced by aid agencies in remotely managing their operations, and offers guiding principles to support agencies in designing their responses to the context of reduced access to beneficiaries.

1. "Population Statistics Dashboard," UNHCR, retrieved June 2018 <http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/overview>. UNHCR reports the number of refugees increased from 10.5 million in 2010 to 17.1 million in 2017, while the number of IDPs increased from 14.6 million in 2019 to 36.6 million in 2018.

2 Donini, Antonio, and Daniel Maxwell. "From Face-to-Face to Face-to-Screen: Remote Management, Effectiveness and Accountability of Humanitarian action in Insecure Environments." *International Review of the Red Cross*, 95 (2014): 383-413; Collinson, Sarah, Mark Duffield, Carol Berger, Diana Felix da Costa and Karl Sandstrom. "Paradoxes of Presence: Risk Management and aid Culture in Challenging Environments." Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, London, 2013.

3 Chaudhri, Simran. "Humanitarian Programming and Monitoring in Inaccessible Conflict Settings Review: Preliminary Findings." Health Cluster (WHO). Presentation to GHC Partner Meeting, 23-24 June 2016, Geneva. Retrieved from http://who.int/health-cluster/about/structure/remote_management.pdf?ua=1;

Chaudhri, Simran, Kristina Cordes and Nathan Miller. "Humanitarian Programming and Monitoring in Inaccessible Conflict Settings: A Literature Review." UNICEF/CDC paper, 2017.

4 Stoddard, A., Harmer, A. & DiDomenico, V. Providing aid in insecure environments: Trends in violence against aid workers and the operational response. HPG Policy Br. 34, 1–12 (2009).

Defining Remote Management

Historically, remote management has been a reactive response to deteriorations in security and access. Aid agencies and international donors generally consider it a last resort, short of suspending operations completely.⁵ Recently, however, some programmes have been managed remotely almost from the outset.⁶ Remote management is now no longer an exception, but a regular mode of operation for humanitarian work, especially in highly insecure contexts.⁷

Towards a Remote Management Framework

The complex parameters of reduced humanitarian space, and the increased risk to humanitarian organisations' staff, assets and reputation, has forced these organisations to seek alternative means of operation, which reduce risk exposure. In practice, this has translated into humanitarian agencies transferring the operational responsibilities traditionally carried out by senior management staff to more junior staff, or to external partners. These responses have generally been developed and implemented in an ad hoc way, without a consistent, overall approach. With the significant increase in the use of remotely managed programmes, it has become evident that ad hoc solutions are not sufficient, and a more coherent and consistent remote management framework is required.

'Access,' as used by the humanitarian community, is defined by two parameters: the aid agency's direct access to the population(s) in need, and the populations' access to the services that the agency is delivering. In this context, there is a pact between agency and local population that helps guarantee acceptance (and, consequently, reduce risks) for the agency to operate: the greater the distance between the agency and the population, the less likely the agency will be accepted, and the less access it will have. To increase local acceptance, aid agencies have traditionally hired staff from local communities within or close to the population they are trying to assist, while considering local cultural, ethnic, religious and gender issues. However, finding skilled and competent staff from within these communities can be quite challenging. Consequently, when an agency transfers operational responsibility from senior staff to more junior staff, logically it expects a decrease in the quality of the programme, since the junior staff will have less developed skills and competencies. However, the loss in quality is compensated by increased acceptance by the local community.

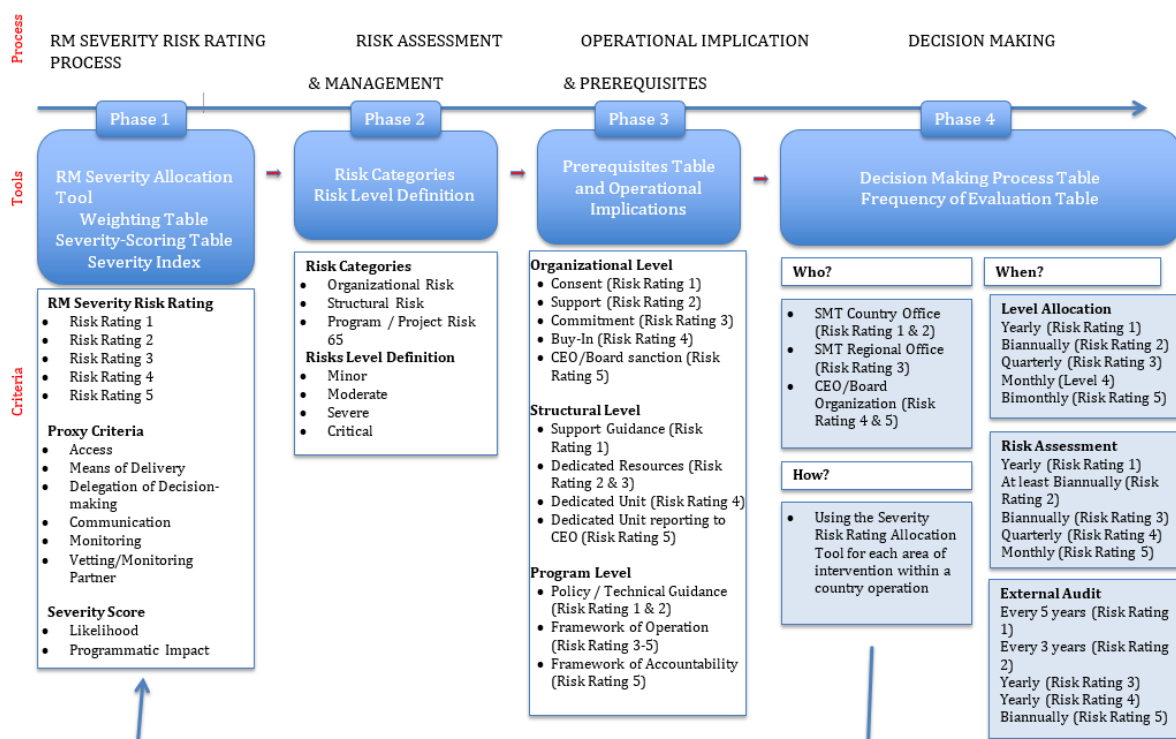
A framework for remote management requires three core components: a guideline or policy, a set of management processes and tools, and the relevant operational protocols. In contrast to a temporary solution, this organisational approach must be understood and implemented as part of an organisation wide practice. The remote management framework shown overleaf was designed in collaboration with Relief International for their operations.

⁵ Stoddard, Abby, Adele Harmer and Jean S. Renouf. "Once Removed: Lessons and Challenges in Remote Management of Humanitarian Operations for Insecure Areas." Report by Humanitarian Outcomes, London, 2010; Hansen, Greg. "Briefing Paper 2: Operational Modalities in Iraq." NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq Briefing Paper, Amman/Baghdad/Erbil, January 2008.

⁶ Integrity Research and Consultancy, Axiom Monitoring & Evaluation. "No Longer a Last Resort: A Review of the Remote Programming Landscape." Working paper for UK AID, DFID, 2014;

Howe, Kimberly, Elizabeth Stites and Danya Chudacoff. "Breaking the Hourglass: Partnerships in Remote Management Settings—The Cases of Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan." Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Somerville MA, 2015.

⁷ Integrity/Axiom. "No Longer a Last Resort".



Defining Risk in Remotely Managed Programmes

The challenges associated with transitioning to a more systematic approach to remote management largely relate to the coherent and consistent management of risk. This is complicated by the fact that risk, within the aid sector, is largely undefined and inconsistent. There are no explicit, universal thresholds for levels of risk, which undermines organisations' ability to make informed decisions about how much risk they can tolerate (sometimes called 'risk acceptance' or 'risk appetite') and impedes the systematic management of risk. Most organisations prioritise programmes where assistance is deemed necessary to save or sustain lives⁸. The more critical the programme, the higher the risk acceptance. Many organisations have context- and risk-assessment frameworks in place, but an understanding of the thresholds at which risk becomes unacceptable is often incomplete, and risk assessment processes remain lacking. Hence, when considering a shift to remote management, in practice, the decision making may rely less on systematic risk assessment than on subjective judgment, intuition, strength of leadership, and contextual issues. In many organisations, these factors vary significantly across countries and operational areas, resulting in a lack of consistency, transparency and accountability in decision making processes. Even within a single organisation, the understanding of the organisation's risk acceptance often varies between field, regional and global management levels.

To help provide a standard for assessing risk, OP has defined a five-point scale that translates subjective descriptions of common risks associated with remote management into quantitative measures.

⁸ Stoddard *et al*, "Once Removed";

European Commission. "ECHO's Approach to Remote Management." European Commission, 2015. Retrieved June 2018 from; Programme Criticality Working Group. "United Nations System Programme Criticality Framework." Report by Chief Executive's Board for Coordination, High-Level Committee on Management, Rome, March 2013.

Severity Risk Rating		Threat to Program delivery					
		Physical Access	Means of delivery	Decision making	Communication level	Monitoring/verification of implementation	Vetting/monitoring/Training of Partners
5	Critical <small>(only in extreme cases with CEO and Board approval)</small>	Limited access only via local residents	Assistance is delivered through local network or local third party with no supervision	Full delegation of authority for program implementation and partial operational decision-making to partner	Limited satellite means	Extremely limited, no direct monitoring, 3rd party monitoring, Peer monitoring	Partners are local networks or CBOs which can only be vetted and assessed remotely with no direct access to partner staff for monitoring and training
4	Severe	Impossible for internationals and restricted freedom of movement for nationals from the country. Access only via local residents (besieged areas, hard to reach areas)	Assistance is delivered through local network or local third party	Full delegation of authority for program implementation and partial operational decision-making to partner	Intermittent, through limited satellite means, or hard copy carrier	Extremely limited, no direct monitoring, 3rd party monitoring, Peer monitoring	Partners are local networks or CBOs which can only be vetted and assessed remotely with limited/extremely limited direct access to partner staff for monitoring and training
3	Moderate	Impossible for internationals, partially possible for nationals of the country	Assistance is partially delivered directly and through other channels such as national partners	Delegation of program implementation and authority for operational decision-making to national staff/partner. Oversight from remote location	Generally good, but some restriction may be faced such as legal limitation for the use of technology or IT solution such as satellites means or ODK platforms	Limited, partial monitoring (spot check), Peer monitoring and 3rd party monitoring	Partners are National NGOs, which can be assessed and vetted directly with regular access to partner staff for monitoring and training
2	Minor	Partial for internationals, full for nationals	Assistance is directly delivered under direct supervision of staff with lower level of managerial capacity	Partial delegation of program implementation to national staff. No delegation of authority for decision-making. Oversight from remote location	Good, but network infrastructure limits the connectivity levels	Regular monitoring operated by national staff, Peer monitoring and 3rd party monitoring (External Evaluation)	Full direct implementation. No partner work, unless organizational policy/approach
1	Negligible	Full for internationals and nationals	Assistance is directly delivered under direct supervision of staff with the required managerial expertise	No or partial delegation of authority for program implementation and decision-making	Very good, with 3G functional networks, limitation mainly due to different time zones	Regular monitoring operated by national and international staff	Full direct implementation. No partner work, unless organizational policy/approach

At some level, all programmes, whether directly or remotely managed, have similar inherent risks. Remote management decreases some risks, but at the cost of exacerbating others, and sometimes creating additional risks. Listing all the risks that a remotely managed programme could face would be impractical, however the risks most typically exacerbated by remote management fall within the following categories: poor quality of service delivery, fraud, aid diversion and corruption. There are high stakes associated with these problems, particularly the diversion of aid and resources towards belligerent or terrorist groups, or the preferential treatment of certain factions of society. These kinds of issues can erode trust and acceptance in local communities, further exacerbating issues with access and security. In an environment of increasingly stringent donor requirements, strict international counterterrorism laws, and burdensome, (sometimes deliberately obstructive) regulations imposed by host governments (which are themselves often conflict parties), humanitarian agencies face profound challenges in pursuit of the humanitarian imperative.

Additionally, in remote management settings, organisations often face unrealistic expectations that the same level of programme complexity and quality can be delivered as in directly managed programmes. Often, too little consideration is given to the revisions in programme design and deliverables that are required to make a programme realistic and feasible under remote management. Junior staff or local partners often do not have an appropriate level of technical expertise, or the resources required, for complex programming, which leads to a real danger of causing harm to beneficiaries or partners.

Accuracy, timeliness and verifiability of data is another major challenge. The term 'remote management' implies distance and lack of direct access for certain categories of staff. Therefore, all stages of the project cycle that require collecting information (needs assessments, monitoring and evaluation) will likely rely on data collected by the staff or partners that are on the ground, and transmitted to staff elsewhere. This creates further issues. The quality of data collected highly depends on the skill of the data collector in conducting interviews, observing the environment and accurately transcribing the data in a given format.

Moreover, due to the reduced access, the granularity and representability of data will also be affected. Finally, there is an increased lag time between when the data is collected, processed and transmitted for evaluation.

Many organisations have turned to technological innovations in an attempt to solve some of these issues, with some success. The use of GPS-tagged photographs and surveys can provide information not only on what activities have been completed, but also where they have taken place. GPS tracking can be used to monitor transport of goods and supplies, to verify whether they arrive at their intended location. Instant messaging applications can be used for beneficiary contact and feedback, where the internet is available. Sophisticated databases with smartphone or tablet-based user interfaces have also appeared, to improve data collection and management. While these innovations have greatly improved monitoring and reporting in remote management contexts, the processing and use of the data towards supporting decision making remains limited.

Core Components of Remote Management

The Operations Partnership has identified three core components of remote management:

- 1) **Risk Management:** Managing risk means understanding organisational risk acceptance, setting thresholds (limits) based on that understanding, and establishing prevention and mitigation measures for the risks encountered in remotely managed operations. It also requires organisations to systematically analyse and monitor risk over time, as risks are not static.
- 2) **Staff Capacity:** When an organisation transfers responsibility from senior staff to more junior staff, it must do so in a responsible manner, with a pre-established organigram and revised job descriptions, as well as ensuring the relevant staff have been trained to the required level of skills and competencies. This should be developed as part of an agency's contingency planning.
- 3) **Data Management:** Since the quality of data will likely be reduced in remotely managed programmes, plans must be developed in advance for how the loss of data quality will be mitigated. Whether it is through the use of third-party monitoring, enhanced information management systems, or additional monitoring and evaluation resources on the ground, these mitigation measures should be adequately planned and budgeted.

Remote management therefore requires robust processes to be in place for assessing, monitoring and managing risks. Feasibility studies and systematic risk assessment should be systematically conducted prior to the start of programme operation. Contingency plans based on significant risks should also be created in advance, to enable thresholds for the transition into or out of remote operation to be built into the programme design, along with the appropriate budget provisions. Agencies must be conscious not to transfer a dangerously burdensome level of risk to junior staff or partner organisations and give careful consideration to their obligations and duty of care.

Remote management also requires robust systems and processes for managing staff at a distance, changes to schemes of delegation, sign-off, staff management, communication, logistics, HR, verification of information, and adequate follow-up and support. Moreover, creative solutions must be sought to build the capacity of junior staff and provide ongoing support at a distance for programme deliverables.

Further Principles to Guide Remote Management

In addition to the three main points made above, the following principles serve as a guide for thinking about some of the most important aspects of remote management:

- a. **Remote management is a non-optimal operational modality:** Although remote management has been increasingly necessitated by security challenges and access constraints, it must be recognised as a non-optimal operational modality, which should only be considered for life-saving and critical programmes.
- b. **Remote management requires acceptance of heightened risk exposure:** Overall, the risks associated with operating in remote management contexts are significantly higher than in direct operations, and the ability to mitigate those risks is likely more limited. In other words, using remote management to continue operation in limited access or conflict contexts requires acceptance of a higher level of risk. It is important to ensure that robust processes are in place to assess risk, determine thresholds and make informed, deliberate and transparent decisions about when to continue and when to cease operations.
- c. **Risk exposure is different for different actors/personnel:** The risks faced by international NGOs and their staff profoundly differ from the risks faced by local and national NGOs and their staff. These must be considered carefully and thoroughly to avoid simply transferring risk from one category of staff to another.
- d. **Context is critical:** In remote management contexts, understanding the context and conflict dynamics is essential to determine risk tolerance thresholds, manage risks, effectively implement programming, and prevent doing harm to beneficiaries or staff.
- e. **Remote management is a different way of working:** Transitioning to remote management requires consideration of all aspects of programme and operational management, including adaptations of processes and procedures related to finance, logistics, M&E and HR. It also requires alternative approaches to staff management, partner management, communication, and capacity building, often through innovative methods. It is essential to ensure that roles, responsibilities, accountabilities and ways of working are redefined in way that is appropriate to the new operational realities, and that is understood by all staff.
- f. **Quality is inevitably compromised by remote management, but humanitarian agencies can still act:** It is important to recognise and acknowledge that the level of quality and technical complexity that is possible in remote management contexts will be considerably reduced. Often, a significant restructuring of programmes is necessary, to limit exposure to risk, and to continue to undertake only the most essential programme activities. This must be considered carefully, to find an appropriate balance between meeting the humanitarian imperative and ensuring that services are of sufficient quality that they do not cause harm to beneficiaries.
- g. **There is no one-size-fits-all solution:** There is no magic bullet for the challenges associated with remote management. However, an organisation wide approach that is structured, comprehensive and consistent, and that prioritises accountability and clear decision making processes, can mitigate those challenges.



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