UCLG CIB
Working Group
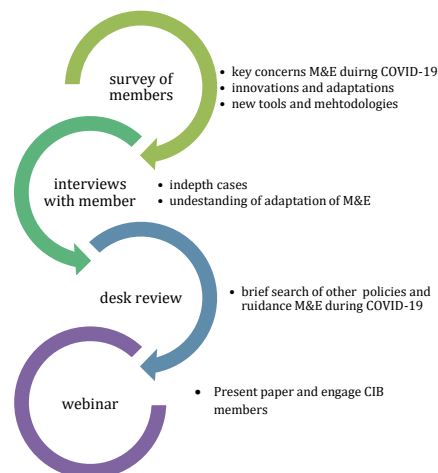Capacity and Institution
Building

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning in the time of COVID-19: A review of practices and guidelines for CIB members
March 2021

CIB member organisations have indicated in recent CIB meetings the desire and utility to learn how members have been evolving and adapting their Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (M&E&L) practices in view of the more distant delivery of their programmes due to COVID-19. A brief review with a small sample of members was undertaken to surface the positive and challenging experiences and practices to produce this paper and present the results in a webinar on 31 March 2021. The review drew on survey results, interviews and desk review of other organizations' experiences of M&E during COVID-19.

survey of members
- key concerns M&E duirng COVID-19
- innovations and adaptations
- new tools and mehtodologies

interviews with member
- indepth cases
- undestanding of adaptation of M&E

desk review
- brief search of other policies and ruidance M&E during COVID-19

webinar
- Present paper and engage CIB members

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed unique challenges and uncertainty on individuals, communities and organisations, including a global pivot away from in-person development programming. While humanitarian programming has been faced with remote access for their programming and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and has created mechanisms to deal with this, many development programs are in a new situation and have had to adapt to COVID-19 by integrating the constraints of social distancing (limiting the frequency, proximity and quantity of face-to-face activities, including M&E).

These organisations and programmes must now consider virtual design, data collection, and learning sessions, while using resources efficiently and bringing stakeholders together remotely across geographies. A quick Internet search surfaces examples of adaptations and innovations in how programmes monitor and evaluate in this new context, as well as challenges in terms of building relationships, ensuring equity in M&E and striving for validity of data in less-than-ideal conditions.

Monitoring and evaluation, whether we are in a pandemic or not, helps programmes to learn, adapt and provide key evidence for multiple accountabilities. The aim is to capture useful data in order to assess the effects of the

Definitions of MEL
- **Monitoring:** tracking and processing data to understand and report progress against an agreed set of indicators.
- **Evaluation:** assessment of the changes resulting from your work to understand the processes that led to change and your contribution
- **Learning:** facilitation of feedback loops to reflect on how well we are delivering our activities and whether we are delivering the right activities to make adjustments and improvements

changes on strategies and programs, learn from the data, make course corrections, and adapt future activities. Doing this during a pandemic means navigating through additional challenges. There are numerous resources that speak to these challenges and how to mitigate them. However, they often assume available resources and capacity of a project team or evaluation team, and do not consider the mental and physical stress put on project teams, let alone of the partners and key actors they work with, by COVID-19. They assume a coordinated, well-staffed and fully-budgeted team and project to easily pivot M&E activities, when in fact many teams and the social actors they support are struggling with shifting programming, with an eye to prioritizing health and safety.

There are many resources with guidance for third party monitors, distributing technology to beneficiaries, monitoring in times of crisis, facilitating virtual sensemaking sessions, etc. This document complements these resources by focusing on the experiences of UCLG's Capacity and Institution Building (CIB) Working Group members, and their frustrations, barriers, needs, experiences and innovations and adaptations with regards to M&E over the past year. The document provides a summary of those responses, as well as some guidance to consider when shifting to virtual M&E&L.

OVERARCHING ISSUES AND CONCERNS

The survey results as well as one-on-one discussions with selected CIB members surface a diversity of contexts and organizations, which translates into a wide range of M&E needs as well as members' prioritization of M&E and learning. Some of the discussions and responses lead to suggestions or recommendations that are not necessarily COVID-19 specific, but are foundations for any organization engaging in robust M&E. As one survey respondent noted "We lacked a fully operational M&E system even before COVID-19".

Other suggestions and recommendations are directly linked to COVID-19 limitations. Some members are focused since March 2020 on 'damage control' (for example, the case of the National Confederation of Municipalities in Brasil to pivot its support for municipalities to provide vital information and updates around COVID-19) and have very little time for M&E as they are trying to help their partners 'stay afloat'. Others, such as VVSG, were able to take on new (online) modalities and technologies to conduct an external evaluation (while still recognising the challenges of decrease in energy and collaborations to do so). A number of trends can be noted:

- **Shifting service delivery / new services.** New activities, to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, which were not considered in original project design. Activities were added to projects, other activities and outcomes were dropped. Being able to provide rapid information to inform decision-making and quick pivoting of focus and response means a shift from traditional approaches to evaluation which can take longer (implicating some trade-offs between real-time information and data that has gone through a lengthier process of collection, validation, analysis and sensemaking).
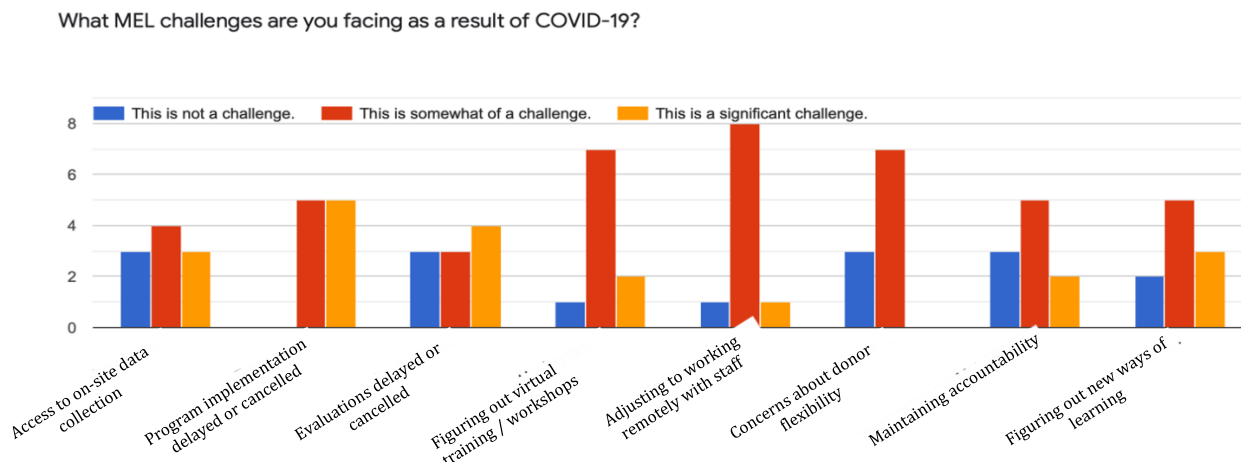
- **Loss of regular ways of building relationships of trust.** Loss of face-to-face interaction with project partners and stakeholders has created a gap in the normal way of building trust and fluid communication and connection. In some places, video calls begin to replace some of that trust building; in other places, there is still discomfort with using technology (and sometimes no connectivity at all to be able to use it).

- **Barriers to physical or usual data collection methods** (such as interviews and observation). Lack of interaction can also mean lack of data; or, the reverse: too many emails and video conferences, as has been the trend since March 2020, now means that people are getting email and Zoom fatigue which also affects the quality of data as people become frustrated and/ or overwhelmed. Besides the loss of opportunities to build relationships, there is also the question of who now gets to be involved in design, planning, monitoring and evaluation, and with limited internet access or technological literacy in some cases, whose voices get heard.

  This brings into question validity of data, equity and access to different perspectives and key actors that are the most marginalised, and any implications for data management when third party monitors are used. Voices that have the most access to internet may be the ones that are heard the most, which could discount the most vulnerable.

- **Interruption in ways of learning.** With a loss of face-to-face interaction and M&E processes, comes a disruption to some of the ways of learning (events, learning cases built on qualitative data), and thus a potential gap in reflection and sensemaking for project improvement as well as bringing others into the folds of those learning events.

- **Focus on outputs of service delivery.** Measuring outcomes can, at the best of times, be challenging for a host of reasons. With a shift in some of the programming to focus on service delivery, and considering the ease of counting outputs, again it becomes challenging to monitor and evaluate outcomes (that is, the changes taking place and how outputs may have contributed to those changes).

Monitoring and evaluation and results-based management and reporting may have been a challenge pre-COVID-19, but in the context of delayed and shifting activities, feelings of overwhelm and stress related to not meeting targets or not knowing how to collect data; and having to learn new technologies and skills in order to collect and analyse data, the collection and analysis has taken a back seat. Reporting regresses to being solely activity-focused with little attention to telling a story of change and contribution, surfacing lessons and using evidence from monitoring and evaluation for decision-making.

Table 1: Summary of challenges perceived from CIB members (via survey; total number of respondents: 10)

What MEL challenges are you facing as a result of COVID-19?

ADAPTATIONS OF MONITORING & EVALUATION BY CIB MEMBERS

While there are numerous M&E challenges that will need to be addressed, there are also positive adaptations from CIB members that can be drawn from; many of these feed into the recommendations presented in the final section of this document. These positive adaptations can be summarized as follows:

- **Going lean has helped to simplify results frameworks, prioritize results and activities.** Be more concise about the data we need (and what we need it for) and then reduce the number of indicators. Allow space for pivoting that does not lose scope of the program in its entirety, but that is realistic and is a response to COVID-19. This implicates some space to re-think how to adapt and adjust, and the information and data that could be useful in making those decisions. Involve your stakeholders in working collaboratively through the shifts and new priorities.

The Union of Municipalities of Turkey (UMT) have streamlined reporting, recognising that programs pivoting to address COVID has meant increased workload for municipalities. Final project reports include a section on COVID-related delays, explaining why previously planned outputs have not been achieved, or have shifted focus.

For ICLD staying in closer and more frequent contact virtually with local government partners has been one way to get ongoing information from the ground. For SALGA, real-time data means creating the custom of inputting data 'as we go' thanks to a shift towards technology.

NALAS introduced a COVID-19 Weekly Update to boost regional coordination and knowledge exchange. It proved to be an inspiration for introducing new activities at national level. This was complemented by a study on the impact of COVID-19 on local governments and key economic and social recovery strategies.

- **Harnessing real-time data has contributed to adaptive management.** Get the data when it is needed, but in a way that is still reliable and inspires confidence in any adaptations made. Getting real-time data may mean that everyone gets better at observations and semi-formal interviews, and that they input this data into the appropriate tools "as we go" and not wait until a mid-year mark for example. It could also mean reducing the scope of key informants, and purposefully sample those we know will have lessons to offer. Focus on qualitative data as well that is systematic and systematised, in order to tell a comprehensive story of change. Again, reducing the scope may mean this happens with a smaller group of people. Finally, pivoting to collect data on new COVID-related programming, activity and outputs responds to the real situations and learning needs of local government institutions, and provides information for sharing across regions.

- **Embracing new technology has been a key tool for enabling virtual M&E**. Individuals and projects are to a agree already familiar with working remotely, particularly multi-country programmes. However, with all possibility of face-to-face events and field visits off the table, building off already existing virtual practice and introducing new elements was important. There were positive examples of new tools being used as people get more and more comfortable online. While virtual interaction does not replace the face-to-face interaction that builds trust, there are still ways of developing relationships through virtual contact. CIB members are still experimenting with tools developed online to collect and record/manage output and outcome-level data; as well as with online facilitation and whiteboard apps for trainings and meetings.

SALGA almost immediately distributed around 200 tablets at the onset of the pandemic, encouraging a new way of working and meeting. Lessons learned are shared virtually, which contribute to continued relationship building with municipalities. At the same time, SALGA recognises that it can be mentally hard for many to forgo the important face-to-face connections, and get used to the 'new normal'.

Old tools are not to be discarded, as members still have success with phone/video semi-structured interviews, but simplifying the interview may be important, as is purposefully building a sense of ease and conversation during the interview. It also helps to ensure that the interviewee is well-prepared by sending them questions in advance and using the tools and technologies that work best for the person being interviewed, and sharingback the interview for

validation. Simple surveys can still be a valid data collection tool, especially when related to project successes, lessons, challenges and stories of change.
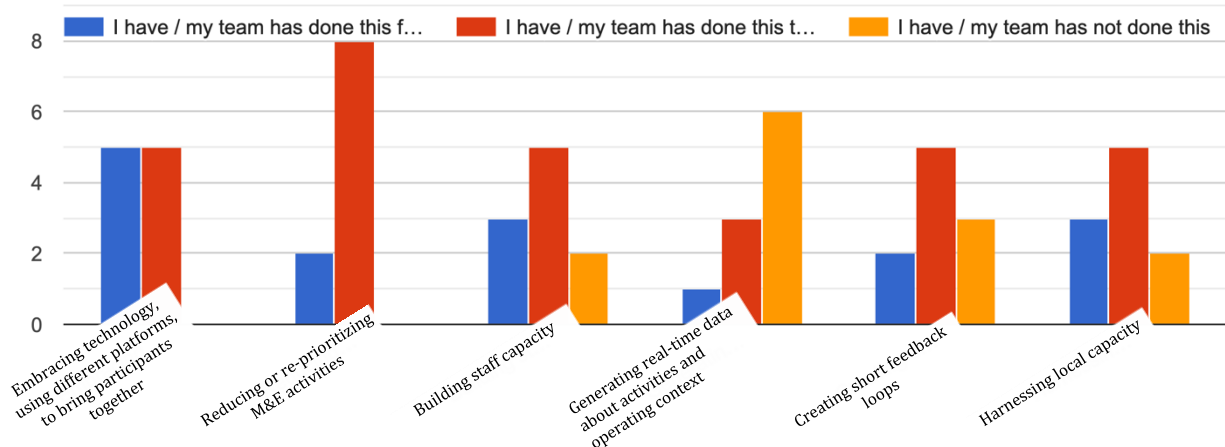
> FCM started focusing more on collecting qualitative information using semi-structured phone interviews in order to complement limited sample sizes of surveys.

- **Shifting to more qualitative data can contribute to understanding change that is happening.** With or without COVID, M&E systems should always consider mixed method approaches. Surveys and questionnaires can become overwhelming, especially with all areas of working switching to online modality. With restrictions on field visits, and with the need to connect virtually, qualitative data collection can be a way to systematically collect narrative and observational data to demonstrate and understand results.

- **Considering local M&E experts can boost capacity for in-house M&E.** If trust and rapport can be built with external, local experts, then the experience relayed was that contracting these individuals as consultants or as in-house M&E experts can ease some of the pressure off of others for data collection and analysis (and avoid discarding the M&E component altogether because of lack of time and resources). One survey respondent noted: "*In terms of project process/structure, having field staff dedicated to both M&E and knowledge management is also a key success factor. A knowledge sharing strategy will support data collection needed for monitoring and reporting, and an M&E strategy will also support the project's ability to share knowledge. In resource-constrained times, the existence of these positions is essential because it lessens the likelihood that these aspects will be completely de-prioritized.*"

Table 2: Summary of adaptations of M&E by CIB members (via survey; 10 respondents)

How are you adapting your MEL as a result of COVID-19?

Bar chart legend:
- I have / my team has done this f… (blue)
- I have / my team has done this t… (red)
- I have / my team has not done this (orange)

Categories (approximate values):
- Embracing technology, using different platforms, to bring participants together: blue 5, red 5
- Reducing or re-prioritizing M&E activities: blue 2, red 8
- Building staff capacity: blue 3, red 5, orange 2
- Generating real-time data about activities and operating context: blue 1, red 3, orange 6
- Creating short feedback loops: blue 2, red 5, orange 3
- Harnessing local capacity: blue 3, red 5, orange 2

CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPROVING M&E IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

This section presents a brief description of some of the considerations members and projects may want to consider when reviewing and improving their monitoring and evaluation functions, methods and processes.

These build off of the adaptations that members are already carrying out or experimenting with. It should be said that some of these are not necessarily practices that are relevant only to a COVID-19 situation. Thinking critically through your M&E framework and planning to ensure optimal utility and innovative methods is something any intervention should do, whether they are faced with a global pandemic or not.

Numerous tools and resources exist that delve deeply into many of these suggestions, with more precise technical offerings. It can also be useful to look at some of the literature on best practices for humanitarian M&E, as these are contexts familiar with working remotely in emergency situations.

Selected recommended reading includes:
- Better Evaluation's blog series on adapting evaluation in the time of COVID-19
- USAID's Learning Lab has a number of references on monitoring, evaluation and learning during COVID-19
- The World Bank's IEG blog has a streamlined collection of recommendations
- The ALNAP guide to using qualitative data in the humanitarian sector, discusses the processing of qualitative data, including how to reduce time and plan for use.
- UNDP has a number of resources on conducting evaluations during COVID-19.
- Specifically for guidance on third party monitoring, https://www.i-aps.com/reports/ has listed a number of interesting reports and guidelines

1. Review your pre-COVID monitoring and evaluation

Many M&E plans have weak foundations, even without COVID-19 in the picture. Starting from a sound base will help tailor your M&E for COVID-19 context. Taking a look at various pillars and questions can help to ascertain the strength of your plan:

- **Designing and planning:** Do you have a clear theory of change? And/or a results framework? Will M&E design consider (test) the theory of change?
- **Operationalizing M&E**: Do you know who and what you are monitoring and evaluating for? Are your M&E activities using the right methods and processes for the indicators, for the data availability and for the resources at hand? Will the M&E get you reliable data that is gender disaggregated and that will help you answer the questions you need answered as part of your project?
- **Storing data:** Does your data storage protect the safety and security of participants? Is data available for analysis?
- **Analysing data:** Do your analysis help to answer the questions identified previously?

- **Sensemaking and learning:** Can you interpret your data? What does it all mean? The "So what?"
- **Using findings:** Are you sharing findings with decision-makers? Are you using findings to make better decision? (the "now what").

Ensuring that your outcome and indicators are evaluable, having a monitoring system (methods, processes, frequency, sources, budget) in place that collects and tools the data you need, establishing rhythms and spaces in a calendar year for sensemaking and reporting, and having a list of potential evaluation questions for mid-term and final evaluations will help create this strong base, which can then be adjusted and retrofitted for COVID-19 realities.

2. Retrofit your monitoring and evaluation plan

New activities, outputs and outcomes will arise because of COVID-19. Other outcomes may disappear or shift dramatically. Changes will need to be made to your M&E including how, from whom and with whom you collect data.

From the survey, respondents suggested:
- More flexible design of M&E frameworks
- Less reliance on large samples of key informants
- Incorporate longitudinal approaches (e.g. following a small sample of key informants at regular intervals throughout project lifecycle)
- Explore more innovative approaches to online data collection e.g. video journaling, live surveys
- Develop M&E reference groups with local champions

- **Describe new activities and effects of those.** Given the focus on changing service delivery to deliver new services or existing services in different ways, evaluations are likely to need to include information about new activities, outcomes or contextual factors. It is unlikely that there are systems in place to effectively collect, manage and analyse data about these new activities.

- **Provide real-time information to inform decision-making.** Where evaluation is seeking to inform rapid adaptations of implementation, speed is of the essence. Quality in evaluation has always been about balancing comprehensiveness and timeliness, but be aware that the increased need for speed raises challenges for many traditional approaches to ensuring quality. Keeping an 'ear to the ground' in terms of the operating context and inviting more informal evidence gathering methods in your M&E system, can help to systematize real-time data and have it available for short feedback loops. You may also want to bring more focus to inquiring about the effects the pivots have had on the original outcomes, how intended participants are perceiving the pivots and their effects, and what learning the pivot has generated that can be used to inform future programming.

- **Reduce the scope of your programming, your indicators, and even your key informants.** Focus on monitoring what matters, but at the same time, you still need to understand the actors and their relationships of power and control in your context so that you do not lose site of the system, and an understanding of whose voice is heard/unheard. Purposeful sampling, in addition to understanding context (why something is working), helps us to gather data from those who are readily accessible, or who volunteer to be engaged.

Strike a balance between having those you have a relationship of trust with that can help with validation exercises and those that you might engage with for a longitudinal study with over several years (following small sample of key informants but at regular intervals all throughout project lifecycle).

- **Adjust your tools and your sources for real-time data collection.**
  With a smaller sample size, you may have room to include more qualitative tools to gather descriptions of change to compose a story of change. This can illustrate change at the outcome level.

In the case that beneficiaries cannot be reached by phone or mobile internet, monitoring through key informants (e.g., field-based project staff, extension workers, community health workers, non-governmental groups) may be an option if the key informants have access to SMS, voice calls, or mobile internet. If necessary, partner M&E specialists may be able to remotely train key informants to collect monitoring data. Make sure you are communicating regularly with key partners (ideally using video conferencing facilities), sharing information and maintaining accountability for any changes that might affect the partnership.

3. **Embrace technology**

This is a given for moving to virtual M&E, but has access and equity considerations as well (who can participate in virtual M&E in terms of connectivity and access to devices such as mobiles and tablets?). In any case, some technological considerations can include:

a. **Phone surveys** – Short and focused surveys can be conducted via short message service (SMS), interactive voice response (IVR) or computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). The survey approach should consider the literacy of the population, their engagement with the program and motivation for participating, the length of the survey, the complexity of questions and the sensitivity of information sought. It should also consider the fatigue they may be experiencing from dealing with unprecedented situations, the amount of new work they have, or general evaluation fatigue.

b. **Individual or group discussions** – Platforms such as Skype and Microsoft Teams are useful to enable semi-structured interviews virtual discussions. Use the breakout room function in Zoom to create more opportunities for dialogue.

c. **Interactive workshops** – Platforms for group discussions and sensemaking can be further made interactive, participatory and collaborative by using platforms such as Mural, Miro, Jamboard, Mentimeter, Slido, and even Google Forms. Use methods that hold respondents' attention. Participatory methods like social, community, or body mapping, free lists, ranking, diagramming, timelines, and photo voices can all support respondents' engagement, and are well suited for virtual platforms. Note though, just as physical workshops require expert facilitation skills, so do virtual workshops, and perhaps even more so. Someone who can bring energy through the camera, knows the technology and can manage it seamlessly, and can guide participants through the right combination of plenary sessions and breakout groups, and ensure lively discussion, is paramount to successful workshops.

In each case, develop a process for obtaining virtual consent; as well as protocols for data storage and validation.

4. **Be comfortable with 'good enough'**.

Be realistic about what is possible – in terms of outcomes, level of data, frequency of monitoring and reporting that can be expected from partners. As you become focused on honing in on key informants and your scope potentially reduces, the quantity and depth of information may be less than if you had had the time, focus and facilitation to collect necessary data and reflect upon it with key stakeholders. There has to be a balance between simplifying M&E as much as possible while still ensuring that you tell a useful story that you and your partners can reflect on for decision-making.

Survey responses: what specific topics related to MEL and COVID-19 would you like to explore further, through CIB or other channels/platforms?

- Digital tools, platforms and approaches for online engagement, learning, data collection, analysis.
- Electronic data collection systems.
- The tools, techniques and methodologies that other LGAs are using.
- How to establish trust to talk about sensitive issues when you are not able to meet face to face.
- Impact data collection during crisis.
- How to motivate project participants to work together (without previously knowing each other).