A FEW LEARNINGS FROM THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND ITS IMPACTS ON INFORMATION MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN THE AID SECTOR:
IMPROVING INFORMATION THROUGH INCLUSIVE PROCESSES AND CAPACITY BUILDING

In the last year or so, the COVID-19 crisis has impacted the aid sector in multiple ways and on various topics. Humanitarian data management is no exception. In the past decade, information and data management has become more and more important in humanitarian responses. **During this particular crisis, as conducting regular field data collection and exchanging with communities got more challenging, humanitarian actors were forced to adapt their data collection and information management practices.** This very particular situation invites us to reflect on the difficulties faced by NGOs in Information Management (IM), the choices they made, how it fits into a larger reflection process in terms of discussing IM stakes and strengthening IM practices within the aid sector.

Since April 2020, **CartONG** has been implementing a project[1] to support the humanitarian sector in adapting its Information Management and Monitoring & Evaluation response to the COVID-19 crisis. **In the course of this initiative, our team has witnessed how operational NGOs adapted to the situation**, as different phases of the crisis unfolded, **as well as how their data and information management needs and practices evolved.** We have also observed **new trends** in the sector (dashboarding, remote data collection) and **reflected on the difficulties** operational actors were facing in terms of data and information management.

Building on this enriching experience, **this learning paper aims at providing an analysis of such evolutions, in particular looking at the impact of the crisis on internal information flows and responsibilities within aid NGOs and what the use of new IM tools meant in terms of IM practices.** **It also reflects on how these evolutions can help more broadly improve the quality of information** produced by NGOs. CartONG's perspective was complemented by the perspective of other H2H organizations and operational actors who have agreed to share their experience with us.

Methodology

The reflections outlined in this paper are based on the following sources:
- CartONG's experience and the review of the requests received from aid actors during the May 2020 - to January 2021 period, whether through the hotline set up for the project or via more regular exchanges with our existing partners; including the three case studies released as part of the project[2].
- Reflections shared during the COVID-19 experience-sharing session on humanitarian data practices[3] that took place during the 2020 GeOnG forum and was co-facilitated by CartONG and the **H2H Network**, and the ones from **Groupe URD**'s 2020 Annual Conference[4].
- The workshop on the consequences of physical distancing on CSOs' Information Management practices that was organized by CartONG on June 18th, 2020, and to which 17 humanitarian and development francophone Civil Society Organizations participated[5].
- Semi-structured interviews with Information Management (IM) or Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) professionals working for operational NGOs whether in the field or in headquarters (**Terre des Hommes** HQ, **Humanity & Inclusion** HQ, **Première Urgence International** HQ, **Solidarités International** in Iraq and in Lebanon, and **Action contre la Faim** in France). Semi-structured interviews with other H2H actors specialized in Information Management and mapping (**HOT** and **MapAction**).

Considering the chosen methodology, this paper neither intends to be fully comprehensive nor to be representative of what all NGOs and H2H actors have experienced since the start of the health crisis. It rather aims to shed light on a few topics that caught our team's attention. It also goes without saying that, as the COVID-19 crisis is still ongoing and its effects are still very much felt presently, further evolutions could still arise. At this time, it is difficult to predict which of the new data management practices will remain in the long run.

By highlighting challenges, opportunities and successes, this learning paper should help H2H organizations specialized in Information Management adapt further to the sector's needs while also highlighting a few relevant IM considerations that operational NGOs can take on by themselves.

Interestingly, as witnessed by CartONG as well as it was reported by other actors in the semi-structured interviews, rather than leading to new aspects, the COVID-19 crisis has actually accentuated pre-existing data management trends, challenges and needs. Among these, none are entirely new, but they have been brought to the forefront due to the crisis and its focus on data. This is why, these considerations should also be looked at through a larger scope, and we invite the readers to check out other studies as well[6].

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1 More details can be **found here**

2 See the following studies:

- **Terre des hommes and Humanity & Inclusion case study of a call-based survey approach in Jordan**, 2020, CartONG
- **ACAPS & IOM case study on data collection processes in Cox's Bazar during the COVID-19 crisis**, 2021 CartONG
- **RESILAC consortium case study on reinforcing adaptive programming through the Feedback Day Method**, 2021 CartONG and Groupe URD

3 Watch the **full session here**

4 Watch the **videos here**

5 **Findings from a Civil Society Organisations' workshop on the consequences of physical distancing on their data practices**, 2020, CartONG

6 **Program Data: The silver bullet of the humanitarian and development sectors? Panorama of the practices and needs of francophone CSOs**, 2020, CartONG

Part 1

Brief recap of the main impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on NGOs and their management of information

It is worth mentioning two ways in which Information Management within aid NGOs was impacted by the crisis, and which both led to interesting reflections, challenges and also opportunities.

1

The COVID-19 context led to a decrease in the capacity of organizations to deploy and implement activities in the field. This particularly resulted in:

- The suspension of non-essential activities,
- An increase in remote working and a more global reorganization of work practices,
- Remote project monitoring and evaluations,
- A decrease in contact with beneficiaries.

At the beginning of the crisis and in most areas of intervention, non-essential activities and M&E activities conducted in the field were either reduced or suspended, suddenly cutting off the links between NGOs and the communities they supported. Organizations had to search for new ways of reaching out to beneficiaries, especially to continue following up on them or to gather information.

Additionally, as remote working became the norm and work practices got reorganized, NGOs relied more on local staff, essential staff (such as medical staff) or local partners to serve as intermediary between affected people and themselves.

This reorganization of the work paved the way to some major changes in practices:
- Contact with affected populations were made over the phone (especially for follow-up surveys) rather than in person. The context even boosted some organizations' experimentation with Artificial Intelligence (AI).
- Essential staff were asked to ensure the follow-up of beneficiaries and to collect data, whereas this task is normally performed by other team members.

2

In many projects, there was a focus on COVID-19 related activities and context, which led to:

- Change of reorientation of activities,
- Creation of new M&E frameworks to follow up these new activities,
- Increased situation assessment.

Although not observed everywhere, in some areas and for some organizations, the need for information increased drastically, especially when it came to the outbreak itself, data on accessibility to certain countries or regions, or the needs of affected people. Similarly, when new support was deployed, the needs for monitoring and reporting increased in some contexts. Overall, the need at every level of management to access data from the field almost in real-time, impacted the existing data flows within NGOs.

Examples

Examples of what has been put in place include:
- Dashboards and mapping of the context (using Open Data and information, or data collected by others),
- Automatic dashboards based on newly defined sets of indicators,
- New reporting systems on COVID-19 activities.

Part 2

A more in-depth look at the effects of the crisis on internal information flows and data collection responsibilities

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout the world, NGOs could no longer easily - or at all, due to travel restrictions or lockdowns - access field environments. Yet, NGOs still needed to collect information and in some cases, even more so than usual in order to adapt their activities to the circumstances and respond to the crisis more effectively. Such a situation had a strong impact on the way information was requested, collected, shared and used internally.

1 **Multiplication of information requests**

Several actors reported that remote working, coupled with the constantly evolving context - due to the crisis - had a strong impact on the management of information within organizations. At the beginning of the crisis, the necessity to make decisions very quickly as little information about the situation was actually available led to an increase in requests for information from top management - whether in headquarters or at field level. This led some NGOs to adapt their information flows.

In some cases, there was an extensive use of remote meetings (using available video-conferencing solutions) in order to facilitate upward communication on a regular basis. Considering that NGOs are often composed of several layers of management, this has led to the multiplication of communication and information channels, especially in context where those channels overlapped with national coordination mechanisms among NGOs. The lack of rationalization of those meetings and information requests was often mentioned, and may have been perceived as a burden for in-country staff.

In other cases, there was a strong focus on quantitative data that materialized by an increase in data collection and the setup of new indicators and reporting systems (for context or program monitoring). Some NGOs tried to implement an additional reporting system using dashboards with regular updates of the context situation, based on externally and/or internally collected data to rationalize the flow of information. More generally, requests for dashboards to IM support organizations boomed during the period.

However, it is important to mention that the lack of access to the field and the focus on quantitative data, numbers and figures, reinforced the existing gap between the teams in the field - who were the only ones able to comprehend the full granularity of the situation - and the staff working remotely. In that context, the interviewees perceived that there may have been a loss of qualitative information that normally serves to enrich the exchanges surrounding project implementation. Such comments highlight an **interesting learning of the COVID-19 pandemic: more than ever, there is a need for co-construction of such reporting systems** as well as **constant feedback and adaptation**. **A key aspect of any global reporting system is the possibility to flow information back to the field**, especially for NGOs that put in place a system accessible to their teams in various locations. Doing so, was mentioned as an **example of good practice to ensure the relevance of the reporting system and its ownership by the staff using it.**

Organizations often innovate during times of crises and ensuing changes can become permanent if no clear exit strategy or end-date was agreed upon. In such situations, some organizational changes, such as the setup of new communication and reporting schemes, can be expected to integrate the *business-as-usual*. On the plus side, changes which bring more efficiency or quality in existing workflows, that may have been perceived as impossible to implement before, can become more easily accepted. For instance, prior to the COVID-19 crisis, digital accountability systems were relatively unknown or were sometimes turned down by organizations because they were not seen as relevant for collecting sensitive complaints. Even though they should not be seen as a silver bullet, their use is now seen by many humanitarian NGOs as a good start to bring in more transparency and two-way communication with affected people in some areas of intervention or activities. On the down side however, additional reporting systems and video-conferencing practices are likely to continue overburdening in-country staff, if not relevant or useful to them.

2 The need for increased coordination

Another way to streamline the flow of information in different fields of intervention is coordinating between NGOs for the sharing of data, information and analysis.

Data sharing is neither a simple nor a recent topic[7]. The obstacles to data sharing are well known by NGOs (difficulties in framing information flows, competition for resources, lack of confidence in one's own data, ethical issues related to data sharing, etc.), but the scale of the COVID-19 crisis has made it possible to take a closer look at these issues and opened up a new window of reflection on the matter.

New coordination mechanisms have emerged, both at headquarter and at field levels in particular for the latter based on preexisting national coordination mechanisms (cluster systems, for example). An initiative such as GIMAC[8] is very interesting in that regard. At the same time, H2H support actors such as the **Humanitarian OSM Team** have contributed to the dissemination of essential data through data export and sharing (on **HDX**) on the most affected areas. This also highlights the importance for specialized actors or organizations to guide and support NGOs in their data sharing and coordination efforts.

In addition, the need for coordination and data sharing around the COVID-19 crisis is not only related to operational decision-making, or about avoiding duplication and gaps, but also to the need of **building a shared understanding of a crisis between aid actors.**

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7 See the following studies:
- **Barriers to Information Sharing among Humanitarian NGOs; A Case of Jordan**, 2019, International Journal of Supply Chain Management
- **Challenges in humanitarian Information Management and exchange: evidence from Haiti**, 2014, DePaul University and Fordham University
- **Data Sharing in a Humanitarian Organization: The Experience of Médecins Sans Frontières**, 2013, Médecins Sans Frontières

3 A higher degree of responsibility for (essential) field staff or local partners?

As expatriate or non-essential staff could not access the field, there was often a change in responsibilities and team dynamics. Indeed, the staff that still had access to the field were the ones that could collect information. It thus became imperative to rely either on national teams (especially essential staff), or on local partners. This meant greater responsibility for them and the need for the different levels of management to trust national teams and local partner's appreciation of the situation so as to ensure the relevance of the intervention.

In some cases, staff for essential activities (doctors, food distribution workers, etc.) were asked to collect data outside their field of expertise, which put them in an uncomfortable situation or, on the contrary, allow them to gain new knowledge and skills and take on new responsibilities. Taking a step back from these practices, this raises the question of the teams' ability to collect data on sectors that they know little about, especially when it comes to surveys about the communities they support. If one can imagine that a doctor is qualified to ask questions about gender-based violence, depending on the context he/she may not feel comfortable (as not properly trained to do so, as it may be perceived as not culturally appropriate, etc.). If such questions are collected while the staff is feeling uncomfortable, what impact does it have on the quality of the data being collected?

When it comes to local partners working with international NGOs, many of them were given more responsibilities in contexts where they remained the only ones able to access the field. However, this responsibility transfer did not always come with a proper vision on the information that needed to be shared back with the international partner. The situation could thus represent a sudden pressure for local partners, some of them being reluctant to share more information than usual or to address the quality of the information provided, especially when data literacy among local partners did not allow for such discussions and the situation often felt more like control than support.

Additionally, this increase in responsibility for local partners or essential staff at field level was not always officially acknowledged by the international partner, and not done to the full extent. Generally speaking, these additional responsibilities did not always come with a higher decision-making power, even though people in the field were more likely to have better knowledge and a greater understanding of the situation. As a matter of fact, the international partner tended to send even more guidance and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), while at the same time made more data and information requests which further complicated the work of field teams and local partners on a daily basis during the crisis.

This raises the question of the relevance of staff working remotely deciding which data to collect and the way to proceed through written guidance or SOPs. Many things can go wrong with such a system, and some were reported by international NGOs as learning points:

- Timing might not be right (e.g. continue data collection on various topics while the population is expecting support to face the COVID-19 crisis),
- The increased amount of surveys can cause survey fatigue among the targeted communities, and
- The requested data may not be the most relevant to apprehend the situation on the ground.

This new situation highlighted the key role of the end of the humanitarian chain - namely, field staff and local partners - in understanding a humanitarian context, and their ability to analyze such a context and thus select critical data or information to collect. They are equally important to information or reporting systems and they should be allowed to influence decision-makers within NGOs. Eventually, trust in the field team's abilities is a quality marker when it comes to data and information. Although this may seem obvious, this is less so when put in parallel with the increased interest of NGO decision-makers in automated systems.

4 An opportunity for cooperative work

In some headquarters, it was noted that working from home actually strengthened the links between remote workers and field teams, as it created a space for exchanges which did not previously exist. Regular conference calls have become the norm which has allowed for more collaborative and more inclusive work between HQ and different operations, or between operations. This was particularly the case for the design of new processes or workflows - especially in IM or MEAL (Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning) topics where HQ does not always hold regular meetings with the field. By doing so, stronger ties were built making it easier to collect feedback from the field teams about what was being implemented.

Nevertheless, embracing this new dynamic between HQ, remote workers and field staff was not always easy. Building trust and efficient communication channels and information flows is challenging in times of crisis, although not impossible. Here are **a few recommendations** shared by NGOs staff which are worth mentioning:
- Streamline remote communication channels and acknowledge the direct impact the crisis has on the internal structure of responsibilities,
- Use the crisis as an opportunity for an open discussion on data and for the training of new staff on data literacy, encouraging the staff or the partner to ask for more support,
- Instead of increasing control over field teams, make sure to offer support through inclusive discussions with them.

Part 3

New tools, new practices?

Beside the evolution of internal information flows and responsibilities on the topic of information management, the lack of access to the field coupled with the necessity to keep collecting data led to the use of new digital tools by NGOs. It is interesting to question how the deployment of these tools may have changed (or not) the practices around data, from collection to analysis.

It is important to note though that for most NGOs, the crisis was not the time to start using new tools, but rather to invest in technology which had already been considered or pre-approved and to extend its usage to new contexts or new projects.

1 Continuing face-to-face surveys vs. doing phone surveys

When unable to continue face-to-face data collection due to lockdown or physical distancing instructions, some NGOs turned to phone surveys as a way to continue the assessment, follow-up and monitoring of their programs[9].

When conducting phone-based surveys, a few interesting issues need to be considered, starting with the evolution of the methodology. Indeed, if an NGO suddenly needs to move its data collection from face-to face to a remote setting, the main question is: how does one adapt one's methodology to match the requirements of a phone interview, while remaining consistent with previous data collection processes?

Additionally, a few other issues impacted data quality, as well as the accuracy of the situation analysis:

- **Representative sampling is really difficult to achieve on a call-based survey**, especially for assessment situations or a follow-up of a baseline survey. Some guidance on the topic already existed at the start of the crisis but making a choice in actual field situations can be much more nuanced and hence difficult to achieve.
- **Sensitive topics are already difficult to discuss in a face-to-face survey, and it is even more complicated to create a safe space over the phone.** There might also be protection issues regarding asking specific questions over the phone, as it is difficult to know the environment in which the respondent finds him/herself (for instance, if he/she is surrounded by other people or not).
- **Parts of the population are harder to reach over the phone.** Women and children especially have lower access to phones. This was also reported by NGOs to lead to a strong bias and a lack of information for parts of the assessed population.
- While surveys over the phone can only replace individual interviews, **focus groups and more qualitative data collection processes were much harder to conduct in times of physical distancing**, leaving little space to complement the data collected over the phone.
- **Lack of time for training in emergency settings** was also mentioned as one of the barriers to high-quality data, especially since face-to-face interview methodology in a non-crisis setting is already quite difficult and not always mastered by field teams. Adapting to phone surveys in a crisis context is therefore even more challenging for them.

All these challenges associated with phone surveys had an impact on data quality and should therefore have pushed organizations to adapt or change their practices. On a positive note, there was a lot of guidance released by operational NGOs themselves at the beginning of the crisis as well as by H2H actors[10], which included a part on adapting methodology for surveys conducted over the phone. However, it remains really difficult to assess if this interest by NGOs on the topic and the resulting adaptations were sufficient enough to ensure data quality.

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[9] For an example see this **case study in Jordan during the COVID-19 crisis**, 2020, CartONG
[10] A couple of examples here:
- **COVID-19 crisis: how to adapt your data collection for monitoring and accountability?**, 2020, CartONG
- **Remote Survey Toolkit - Prepared in Response to COVID-19**, 2020, 60 Decibels

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2   Technology to help collect feedback of the population

Since the start of the crisis, collecting feedback from the affected people has been a big concern among humanitarian actors, but it has also been difficult for them to find the best way to do so in a time of travel and physical distancing restrictions. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on complaint and feedback mechanisms were analyzed by Samantha Melis in a study commissioned by the **CHS Alliance** (to be published in 2021).
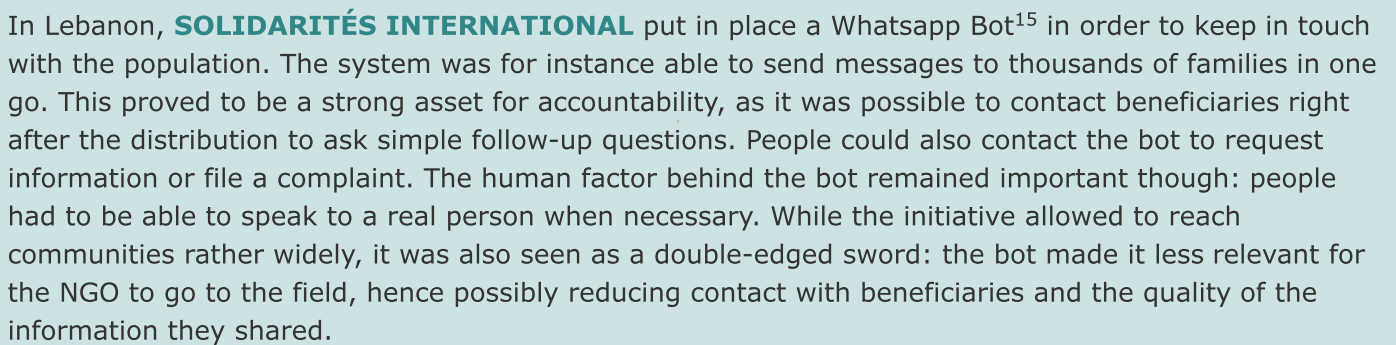
Melis' analysis shows that "lockdown had a huge impact on complaint mechanisms because contact was broken". It became necessary for organizations to think of new ways of reaching out to affected people without being present in the field.

Two main phenomena were brought to light. According to the analysis of **Ground Truth Solutions**, COVID-19 has sometimes become an excuse not to work in partnership with communities[11]. In "normal" times, handling complaints and feedback and closing the loop with affected people is not systematically prioritized by humanitarian actors[12]. When the pandemic started, accountability and participation practices were often not considered as essential. The "relational" aspect of aid[13] was deprioritized against its more conventional transactional objective (providing assistance and services).

On the other hand, the crisis was an opportunity for some actors to roll out or test fully digital or mixed complaints and feedback handling systems. Few organizations had done so in the past, but with the crisis most actors rolled out new mechanisms which also implied a significant change in their habits. Within the scope of CartONG's project, few concrete requests for support were received (for instance on how to operate a specific mechanism) although the workshop on Information Management practices we organized back in June 2020 showed that most actors needed broad guidance and benchmarking advice on the topic yet did not know how to ask for support and to formulate their exact needs.

The review on digital solutions for feedback and complaint mechanisms[14] published during the project highlighted the many systems that can be used, while pinpointing the specific types of programming or contexts where each system can fit. It also showed that organizations often choose to digitize part of their systems: having access to people with no phones can be impossible through a fully digital system so mechanisms can involve another party to make sure targeted people can voice their feedback or dissatisfaction. **Turning to digital mechanisms hence does not mean removing people's fundamental intermediary roles.** Besides, good practices are still rare. As this issue is still relatively new in most organizations, there is a need to share (innovative) experiences, as well as good and bad practices on the topic.

In the MENA region for example, a pre-existing centralized CRM (Complaints and Response Mechanisms) used at the national level was reactivated by aid actors during the crisis to give more room to feedback that was not accessible anymore. But the very hierarchical nature of the system - here a national cluster receiving a complaint forwarding it to a specific regional subcluster forwarding it in turn to a national NGO supposed to tackle the issue - had the exact opposite intended impact. As a matter of fact, it strayed away field actors from the coordination system while giving in return low quality data (as it was gathered in a whim just to address the request) which gave the coordination body the illusion of information without the relevance of good data, accentuating the chasm between the field and the management stakeholders.

In Lebanon, **SOLIDARITÉS INTERNATIONAL** put in place a Whatsapp Bot[15] in order to keep in touch with the population. The system was for instance able to send messages to thousands of families in one go. This proved to be a strong asset for accountability, as it was possible to contact beneficiaries right after the distribution to ask simple follow-up questions. People could also contact the bot to request information or file a complaint. The human factor behind the bot remained important though: people had to be able to speak to a real person when necessary. While the initiative allowed to reach communities rather widely, it was also seen as a double-edged sword: the bot made it less relevant for the NGO to go to the field, hence possibly reducing contact with beneficiaries and the quality of the information they shared.

[11] Based on their intervention at the **2020 GeOnG experience-sharing session** on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on data practices
[12] As shown in the **2020 Humanitarian Accountability Report** of the CHS Alliance
[13] As described in **ALNAP's 2019 background paper on aid relevance**
[14] **What digital solutions for feedback and complaint mechanisms?**, 2021, CartONG and Groupe URD
[15] To be noted: this initiative did not start due to the COVID-19 crisis, it was already planned and its development was only accelerated by the crisis.

Improving information for better decision-making in humanitarian settings

1 Capturing the reality behind data

The organizational reshuffle that COVID-19 imposed on organizations had a wide array of consequences. The first one being that, caught in quicksand, organizations needed to step on a firmer ground and thus opted to rely heavily on quantitative data (as numbers provide an impression of impartiality and reliability); when such a focus on quantitative aspects can lead to a gap when it comes to understanding the granularity of any given situation. Strategic reflections solely based on figures and quantitative indicators, without analyzing it in its qualitative context have significant chances not to reflect the full picture of a situation.

Additionally, infobesity can and has been a real issue for several actors being drawn to quantitative data and who encountered difficulties to ultimately make decisions. As mentioned by **Ground Truth Solutions** during the 2020 GeOnG forum, "it has been a challenge to close the loop in the flow of data in order to get back the value of information"[16].

More formal qualitative data collection is necessary to orient data collection and refine the analysis of quantitative data. On that topic the experience of **ACAPS** and **IOM**, involving Rohingya researchers able to access the field is quite enlightening and worth sharing[17]. It loops back with **the necessity of involving (more) national staff, local partners and actually even community members, to be able to build a comprehensive understanding of a situation that quantitative data alone cannot achieve.**

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[16] Based on their intervention at the **2020 GeOnG experience-sharing session** on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on data practices
[17] See more about it in these two resources:
- **ACAPS & IOM case study on data collection processes in Cox's Bazar during the COVID-19 crisis**, 2021, CartONG
- **The Stories being told: Rohingya report on the epidemic**, 2020, ACAPS

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2 Acknowledging biases and interpreting data[18]

Many potential data collection biases were already mentioned in this paper. Such biases - not new yet which have been reinforced by the health crisis - make it difficult to produce relevant analysis and this has been a significant challenge in the aid sector. Actors have a responsibility to decide, prior to the data collection, whether or not the outcome of a data collection process will be useful for analysis and decision-making purposes, or if another solution should be used instead (for instance, relying on another actor with better access to conduct the data collection).

Organizations should anticipate potential biases, methodological issues and negative impacts on data quality prior to the start of the data collection, rather than try to fix the issues afterwards. **It is also crucial they are honest about the limitations they face in the analysis phase. Identifying the voices missing from the data collection, and acknowledging them in an analysis brings value and enables other NGOs to use (and maybe complement) the data that has been collected.**

This also questions the ability of NGOs to go one step further in situation analysis, while too often the analysis remains at a descriptive stage and fails to provide insight for operational decisions. There is a need for meaningful and accurate information and reports, and for that analysis needs to be refined.

During the project, several organizations mentioned they would **need to build further capacity in data analysis**, with potentially the support of aid actors specialized in situation analysis. More specifically, they expressed the need to be able to:
- Decide on what they need to know,
- Design an unbiased analysis plan (as much as possible),
- Identify operational decisions that can be made based on this analysis.

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[18] On the topic of biases, we recommend watching the recording of the **2020 GeOnG experience-sharing session** on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on data practices

3   Strengthening data literacy

CartONG, as other H2H actors supporting operational organizations in Information Management such as **MapAction**, have noticed a strong focus on data quality in the requests they have received from NGOs since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. To name a few, these range from supporting the implementation of best practices developed by IM communities, to ensuring the quality of data or delivering training to staff, but they also include the revision of data collection processes or greater compliance with the GDPR. **This leads us to believe that due the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increased need for further reflection on data literacy within the sector.**

Nevertheless, none of the reflections presented above are new. They were all already widely discussed in the IM humanitarian community yet, they were emphasized by the crisis and the widespread use of remote data collection which led to an increase in biases and a decrease in the possibility of triangulation and of complementary qualitative or informal data collection. **Producing insightful information has always been a challenge but maybe now more so than ever.**

4   Reflection on H2H support modalities

There are key lessons to be drawn from the COVID-19 crisis in terms of relevance and effectiveness of H2H organizations' support modalities.

First, it seems obvious that NGOs (local and international) do not only need temporary or one-off support, guidance or training but also long-term investment if they are to do more of their own data collection. There seems to be also a need for initiatives that set standards for the sector.

It has also been very **difficult for some NGOs to identify exactly the support they needed** in this particular time, **and thus for IM H2H actors to provide the support, tools or resources that exactly met their needs** due to this relative uncertainty and lack of perspective. **A lot of the time, requests were actually about topics requesting in-depth (long-term) support, going way beyond specific needs related to the COVID-19 crisis.**

Finally, there might also be an issue in the way NGOs have been supported during the COVID-19 crisis, either by their HQ or even by NGOs specialized in IM support. Many guidelines were released at a time where actors had very little time on their hands, or more urgent topics for field teams were not always prioritized by HQ or support organizations.

Looking back, it seems that the right timing for releasing resources (guidelines, tutorials, etc.) may not be at the peak of a crisis. Wise medium-term investments based on the feedback of field teams can be more impactful than just creating an automated dashboard or producing guidelines at the beginning of a crisis, even if both processes can work simultaneously.

Conclusion

On the one hand, it appears that the generalization of remote work coupled with a global crisis increased the need for information, leading to the multiplication of communication channels and information flows within NGOs. They had to rely mostly on the people that were still able to access the field: the end of the humanitarian chain, that is to say national essential staff, local partners, and ultimately local communities. These transfers of responsibility did not always come for them with the proper acknowledgement, trust and/or decision-making power, resulting in increased pressure to collect data or information without owning the purpose of the process. **It also raised questions about the role of the end of the humanitarian chain, when it comes to collecting data and to influencing situation analysis and decision-making processes within NGOs.** On the other hand, we have also witnessed **new opportunities for more collaborative work, and co-construction, within NGOs and thus greater ownership** of processes, systems and workflows by field teams.

NGOs have also tended to rely a lot more on remote data collection, such as phone surveys or digital CRM, but new tools or new processes have often not been enough to close the gap of information created by the limited access to the field. As NGOs focused mostly on quantitative data collection and reporting systems to understand field situations, **the need for a complementary quantitative-qualitative approach was deeply felt to ensure a more comprehensive situation analysis and to limit biases induced by remote situations on top of other biases usually met in humanitarian settings, in particular issues of representativeness.**

To increase the overall quality of analysis within the humanitarian sector, two main elements stand out. Firstly, it is **key to be honest about potential biases** in one's data, to allow other NGOs to use (and maybe complement) data that has already been collected. Secondly, there is a need to **reinforce the humanitarian sector's ability to produce in-depth data analyses which provide insight for operational decision-making.**

Overall, the crisis highlighted the **need for increased data literacy within NGOs** and their teams - a recurring consideration in the humanitarian IM community. In some cases, the poor understanding of the issues surrounding data resulted in NGOs being unsure about how to articulate their needs for support in terms of Information Management - which further complicated the ability of HQ and also H2H organizations to provide relevant support and resources. Additionally, it so happens that often **NGOs actually needed in-depth IM support going way beyond the current crisis**, emphasizing the idea that many of the Information Management stakes and issues were already known but had been highlighted or reinforced by the COVID-19 crisis. **Hence the crucial necessity to strengthen NGOs' IM capacities in the long run.**