Evaluations during Covid-19

We are working in exceptional circumstances and therefore creating time to reflect on our actions and gain a deeper understanding of our project, its achievements and learning will be critical during Covid-19. But with limited access to project sites, it is important to consider when and how to do evaluations during the pandemic, or whether to postpone until the situation stabilises. Some of the key principles we need to consider are:

- **Adopt a 'Do no harm' approach:** Above all, we must ensure that our activities do not harm the health or safety of the people we work with. Follow the relevant government regulations around physical distancing. Where countries do not have major restrictions in place yet, we still have an ethical duty to put safety first.
- **Ask how critical it is:** Communicate with project staff and donors to understand what data is 'need to know' as opposed to 'nice to know'. Look at pre-existing project data and secondary sources to see if there are any critical gaps. Any non-essential evaluation activities must be paused until the situation stabilises.
- **Be agile in your planning:** The situation is rapidly evolving so be prepared for plans to change eg delaying evaluations, negotiating new deliverables and timelines with donors, adapting methodologies to keep things simple and practical, and to reflect remote arrangements where necessary.
- **Maintain consistent and transparent communication:** Consider using SMS, WhatsApp or Skype to keep your stakeholders, such as community members, project staff, technical advisers and donors, updated about any changes to your plans.

This document provides guidance on when and how to undertake evaluations during the Covid-19 pandemic, and gives examples of remote data-collection tools for evaluations, learning reviews and real-time reviews.
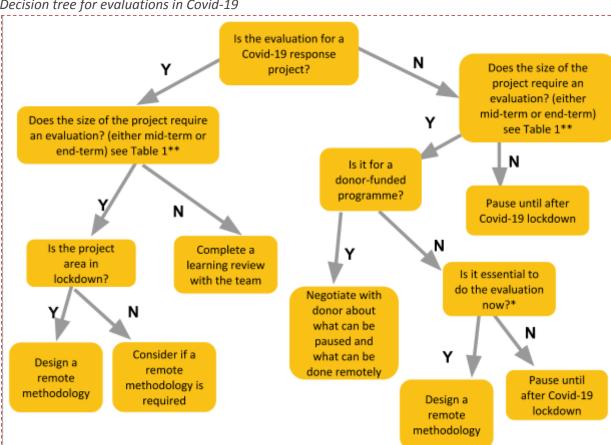
Is an evaluation needed now?

The decision tree below is designed to help you decide between either conducting an evaluation remotely or waiting until the situation stabilises. Much depends on the context and urgency of the specific evaluation. For example, an evaluation for a non-Covid-19 project might be put on hold until it is safe to visit the project sites. One benefit of delaying is that it could give you the chance to see some of the longer-term impacts of your work. By contrast, a specific Covid-19 response may need to be evaluated using remote methods to learn, adapt or meet donor requirements.

Top tip: Be proactive in communicating with your key stakeholders (eg those whom you are expected to report to or those with whom you are working to implement your evaluation). Discuss your options with them and start making adjustments and contingency plans as necessary.
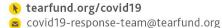
Decision tree for evaluations in Covid-19

*Note that there is no financial year carry-forward allowed, and so new funding will need to be allocated. If new funds will not be available, it may be necessary to consider using a remote evaluation methodology.

**Tearfund's guidelines for evaluations according to the size of the project are set out below in Table 1. If you are from an organisation not associated with Tearfund, please refer to your organisation's guidelines.

Table 1: Tearfund evaluation & review guidelines summary

		Project/intervention funding size (total)				
		Up to £50k	**£50k to £100k**	**£100k to £250k**	**£250k to £500k**	**>£500k**
Mid-term	**Format**	Learning review recommended	Learning review recommended	Learning review or real-time review	Real-time review	Real-time review
End-term	**Format**	Learning review	Learning review or evaluation	Evaluation	Evaluation	Evaluation

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Next steps…

- If your decision tree has taken you to 'design a remote methodology', then continue reading this document for guidance on how to plan and implement a remote evaluation, learning review or real-time review.

- If you have decided to pause an evaluation, make sure to communicate that decision with the key stakeholders and consider funding implications.

- If you are still unclear whether an evaluation is needed, please consult with your cluster DME Adviser.

Planning for a remote evaluation

If you are planning a remote evaluation, learning review or real-time review, this section outlines some key planning considerations and adaptations in light of Covid-19.

Table 2: Planning for a remote evaluation

Key steps	Considerations during Covid-19 (inspired by UNDP and ALNAP's *Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide*)
Identify and engage key stakeholders	It is important to understand and manage the expectations of key stakeholders when planning your evaluation. This includes those who are commissioning the evaluation, donors and users, such as country staff, partner staff and technical advisers. Consider whose needs should be prioritised and why. Use digital platforms (eg Google Docs, Zoom) to engage stakeholders remotely throughout the evaluation, and be considerate of whether their capacity or role may have changed at this time. Make sure you check in and make adjustments to your engagement plans as necessary.
Write or adapt Terms of Reference (ToR)	During Covid-19, the terms of reference for an evaluation should be revised to reflect remote methodologies (see Table 3) and changes in key questions, deliverables and timelines. Keep it simple and feasible. Only ask essential questions that answer your key evaluation queries and will inform future decision-making. You may find it useful to look at the OECD-DAC criteria to guide your evaluation questions, but you do not need to cover them all. For real-time reviews, you will find a list of suggested questions in Annex A.
Who should conduct the evaluation?	The location of the person leading the evaluation is important. Ideally, they will be familiar with the context, in the same time zone and able to speak the local language. Other factors to consider are: capacity, skill, budget and government restrictions. An external consultant may bring specific experience in remote monitoring technologies; a joint

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	team of external and internal evaluators can combine objectivity as well as internal learning; or when some movement is permitted, project staff or a locally based consultant may be able to collect data as part of project delivery. Note: If an external evaluator is conducting the evaluation, share these guidelines with them to help them design an appropriate remote approach.
Budgeting/resources	The budget for a remote evaluation will look different from a regular evaluation: for instance, some costs such as travel expenses will be reduced, but new costs may arise from using remote technologies, such as Zoom or Kobo. Some key considerations are: Does the community have access to a telephone? How should respondents be compensated (phone credit/SIM cards)? Does the organisation have the budget to meet these expenses? If possible, have some flexibility in your budget to make adjustments as needs arise and ensure that you have clear decision-making processes so that these changes can be actioned as quickly as possible.
Ethical standards	There are several ethical considerations to keep in mind when planning an evaluation. It is essential for those involved in an evaluation to adhere to international standards and humanitarian principles, particularly 'Do no harm', as they engage with affected communities and make decisions. The evaluation team should consider: a) if the evaluation could put members of the community at risk, b) whether and how things have changed for the most disadvantaged and marginalised, c) how to include the most marginalised in the evaluation eg Do all community members have equal access to technology? Confidentiality, informed consent and data protection are all important safeguards which must be put in place before data collection.
Using and sharing findings	Make sure that key evaluation findings are shared both internally and externally to inform future programming. It can be helpful to produce a summary, as well as the full evaluation, as different stakeholders will need different levels of information. Think of alternative ways to share findings digitally eg a learning workshop online, blog post, video clip. When using virtual stakeholder meetings (on eg Zoom, Skype) to share your findings, do a test run and factor in time zone differences. Consider if the community themselves can engage with these channels, or if you will need to wait for physical distancing measures to be relaxed before presenting findings back to them.

Remote evaluation tools

The table below outlines some recommended remote evaluation tools. For areas with no telephone coverage, this will be particularly difficult as there are no easy remote data-collection alternatives. Therefore, primary data collection will potentially have to be suspended.

Table 3: Remote evaluation tools

Remote evaluation tools (adapted from ALNAP's *Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide*)				
Remote tool	**How to use**	**Example of use**	**Challenges**	**Considerations**
Secondary data Using existing data to build a picture of a situation. This will help you to identify critical gaps where primary data is needed	Consider what secondary data is available if you cannot access the affected population eg national and local government records, other NGOs, UN, WHO, ACAPS Also consider what existing project data is available	Qualitative analysis of secondary data, such as progress reports Numerical analysis of distribution data such as distribution data records	There may be very limited or too much data available Consider how trustworthy data sources are and if they are likely to have a biased perspective	Where possible, data from documents should be tested through triangulation Consider also looking at social media channels, such as Facebook and Twitter
Interviews and surveys Can be carried out online, by phone, and/or SMS/WhatsApp instead	Design short and simple surveys to gather essential primary data from beneficiaries and key informants Keep questions short and concise, and test beforehand (no longer than 30 mins). Consider appropriate literacy levels and language	Soap/hygiene kit distributions: collect numbers during distribution for post-distribution monitoring text messages Mobile money cash transfers: post-distribution monitoring through text messages Behavioural change survey	SMS and online surveys are subject to self-selection bias and so the findings need to be interpreted with care Phone surveys may be biased according to those who have mobile phones. If participants are borrowing phones, they may not have the	**Option A:** Beneficiaries have mobile phones and consider how you will reimburse beneficiaries for credit and battery used during interview/survey. Project team should collect phone numbers from beneficiaries who are willing to give feedback

	Key informant interviews (KIIs) can be used to gather in-depth information to be complemented by shorter questionnaires for a sample of beneficiaries	(KAP) sent to phones in the community	privacy to speak honestly In a politicised environment, people may be reluctant to speak to someone they do not know May need government permission to gather data via phone	**Option B:** Use existing community communication structures such as a community liaison contact point with access to a phone **Option C:** The project may fund mobile phones and give them to a small sample of the most vulnerable beneficiaries in order to be able to communicate with them
Remote Focus Group Discussions (FDGs) Conduct FGDs via three-way or multi-person audio/video call if technology permits	Keep the questions short and to the point	A good chance to discuss more sensitive issues or open-ended questions that may benefit from a group discussion	It will be much harder to reach the most vulnerable due to needing a strong internet connection, especially for video calls	Requires access to internet/reliable network Try to work with enumerators who have or can build a good rapport with participants. Local universities might have skilled interviewers you can work with
Remote observation Used instead of doing a transect walk through a community in person	Key informants and community members can take videos and photographs, using cameras with built-in Global Positioning Systems	Handwashing facilities set up: photos sent of handwashing facilities in use	While this may be suitable for observing the physical landscape and infrastructure, it may reveal little about how well it is being used, eg	Community members need to have phone-camera capability for photo messaging/video access

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	Ensure they are advised to still maintain physical distancing at all times as necessary		who has access, how is infrastructure being maintained	Can be coupled with other surveys such as a KAP survey sent to phones in the community
Participatory videos/stories A story of impact can be shared through video	This involves the project participants using mobile phones to film each other as they reflect on the project activities	Project participants can 'interview' each other and record their answers. This could be done as project diary entries or participants can be given specific questions to record their answers to	Ensure that participants are advised to maintain physical distancing at all times, as necessary	The project may fund mobile phones and give them to a small sample of the most vulnerable beneficiaries to be able to communicate with them
Community liaison Identified to represent the local community	A local focal point could be identified from the community to gather information on your behalf eg surveys or interviews A suitable person for the role might be a Gender or Peacebuilding Champion, local women's group, or a CCM facilitator	This could involve sending photos to show the situation in the community or conducting simple KAP surveys or questionnaires for a needs assessment	There could be issues with bias. The liaison person will have a specific view of the situation which might not represent the wider community Consider which people might give a more neutral view and represent the views of more marginalised groups	Ensure the liaison person has access to a mobile phone and consider how you will reimburse their credit and battery use
Using existing essential community visits eg distributions	If project staff or service providers are continuing to make in-person visits for project	Short questionnaire completed as part of service delivery	In some cases, communities might want less contact with project staff than	Ensure the government regulations are followed and that, first and foremost,

Used if limited movement is permitted for project delivery	activities, consider what data they can collect while they are with the community. In this way, no additional visits are made for data collection	Collection of mobile numbers during distribution	official guidance allows. They may not feel comfortable taking part in additional data-collection activities	no harm is done to project beneficiaries or staff

Top tip: Where possible, choose more than one data-collection method from the list above, and compare the results to look for trends and themes. This will enhance the credibility of your data and conclusions. We call this approach 'triangulation'.

Learning reviews

Learning reviews provide opportunity for teams to gather and reflect on what was planned, what actually happened and what didn't work as effectively as hoped. They provide space to identify how improvements can be made to the project going forward and what can be done in future activities to avoid problems or repeat successes.

It is important to consider the opinions of a range of stakeholders, such as project staff, beneficiaries, community leaders and Tearfund staff. Restrictions on movement due to Covid-19 mean that you will not be able to gather in person for the review; however, you can conduct the process remotely as shown in the steps below:

Steps for organising a remote learning review:

1. Identify the key learning questions that you want to answer in your learning review.

2. Gather inputs from your stakeholders remotely via Zoom, phone, WhatsApp or email (see Table 3), **or** where appropriate, someone within the community, eg a CCMP facilitator or Gender Champion, may be able to conduct a 'lessons learnt' meeting and produce a summary of the discussion (only where communities are still able to meet).

3. If possible, hold a remote learning workshop via Zoom or Skype to analyse the findings and key themes **or** if one individual is responsible for the analysis, ensure you share the outcomes with your stakeholders for them to comment and feed back.

4. The output of any learning review should always be a set of specific actionable recommendations.

See page 116 of Tearfund's Roots 5 guide on *Project cycle management* for more tips on holding learning meetings.

Real-time reviews (RTR)

If your project is more than £100,000, you may need to conduct a real-time review (RTR), particularly if external funders require this during a Covid-19 response. An RTR is an evaluation of an ongoing humanitarian response as it unfolds. This enables us to assess programme performance part-way through a response, to ensure that it is on track, that the strategy remains appropriate and that the assumptions on which it is based are valid. (A learning review, by contrast, can be conducted once the response is complete.)

The aim of the review is to learn and adapt quickly. At Tearfund we run RTRs two to four months after the beginning of a response. This helps us to reflect on the first few months and make some alterations to our response strategy, if needed. If the response is in two phases, then it is helpful to conduct the review before you finish designing phase two. During Covid-19, conducting a real-time review will involve a number of remote methods (outlined in Table 3). As with all Tearfund evaluations, we use OECD-DAC criteria. For an RTR during Covid-19, you may want to specifically include:

- **Relevance** – concerned with assessing whether the project is in line with local needs and priorities

- **Efficiency** – measures the outputs (qualitative and quantitative) achieved as a result of inputs

- **Effectiveness** – measures the extent to which an activity achieves its purpose, or whether this can be expected to happen on the basis of the outputs. Implicit within the criterion of effectiveness is timeliness.

In humanitarian RTRs you may want to focus specifically on whether the project or programme is accountable to affected populations (Quality Standards). You may also want to explore coordination and connectedness. Connectedness is crucial in humanitarian RTRs, as it addresses the key question of the strategic impact of the short-term decisions taken during the early stages of the response.

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General 'top tips' for evaluations during Covid-19

- **Do no harm and ensure adherence to humanitarian principles:** Follow the government guidelines and put the safety of participants and the evaluation team first. Ask yourself, 'Is this evaluation necessary at this point in time?' If yes, then proceed with your survey. Work closely with local partners or community liaisons who can guide you in deciding what is/isn't appropriate in a specific context.

- **Keep it simple:** Limit data collection to essential and critical data for project implementation and context monitoring. This can be done by reviewing pre-existing project data and secondary sources to identify critical gaps. Postpone non-essential data collections and use key informant interviews to answer some of your more in-depth or sensitive questions, so that beneficiary questionnaires can be short and concise.

- **Make maximum use of secondary data:** Limit unnecessary data collection by making use of the large amount of publicly available data currently being generated. The limitations on primary data collection can also be an opportunity to explore your old data that you may not have had time to analyse completely yet.

- **Build on existing relationships:** Local partners will often already have a good rapport with communities, and participants may be more willing to speak on the phone to people they trust. It is important that those gathering the data are good relational thinkers, otherwise the quality of the information gathered may be superficial.

- **What is 'good enough'?** Due to Covid-19 restrictions, you may not be able to speak to as many people as you usually would when gathering your data. Consider what is a 'good enough' standard of rigour. Decisions are being made quickly, and so having some data to support those decisions when they are made is better than waiting for a lot of data later on. When choosing a selection of people to speak with, choose informants from across the different stakeholder groups whose opinions need to be reflected.

- **Think ahead:** Most remote methods require the use of mobiles or the internet. Is it possible to collect the telephone numbers of key actors in your area in advance? Using the telephone or internet will require participants to use their mobile credit and battery. Think now about how to reimburse your participants (credit distribution, reimbursement by mobile payment).

- **Connect with others:** Where appropriate, share your data-collection methods with others eg partners, clusters, networks and other evaluation offices. Collectively, we can help each other adapt to evolving evaluation approaches, methods, technologies and tools that are needed to continue our work during Covid-19.

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Case studies:

Tearfund, IDP returnee WASH/basic needs project evaluation, Iraq

An external evaluation for the IDP returnee WASH/basic needs project was commissioned to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of Tearfund's intervention in Kirkuk, Dohuk, and Ninewa, and to produce recommendations for the improvement of future operations in Iraq. Due to conflict and instability in the region, the evaluation team faced a number of constraints and challenges. Restricted access to some project locations meant that the evaluation team had a limited amount of time to spend on the ground evaluating projects. Alternative sources of data were investigated, such as post-distribution monitoring which took place in the form of phone calls at all locations where the evaluation team visited. The evaluation team obtained quantitative and secondary data from a range of documents, including but not limited to, proposal documents, semi-annual progress reports, previous external evaluation reports, and internal learning reviews , to verify the information in the absence of conducting site visits. Despite the challenges, overall there was a reasonable degree of confidence that the evaluation had managed to cover the key issues about the programme implementation as they relate to the evaluation criteria.

Good practice example of interviews by phone: Oxfam GB evaluation of Somalia drought response

For its cash-distribution programme, Oxfam GB collected mobile phone numbers of participating beneficiaries. (The real-time evaluation [RTE] suggests that 10–15% of beneficiaries registered their phone number.) During the RTE in September 2011, a small number of people were called to provide feedback on the programme. This yielded some noteworthy results. For example, of 12 numbers called, five answered (one of whom actually returned their missed call). The purpose of these conversations was to assess beneficiaries' knowledge of their selection criteria, their impression of the process, understanding of the project, and whether they knew how to lodge any complaints. The feedback from these calls yielded several insights. For example, all the respondents said they understood the selection criteria, and most indicated they knew how to contact an official from the organisation if necessary, although none was aware when, how and how much money would be received. Source: Featherstone (2012: 13–14) in ALNAP *Evaluation in Humanitarian Action* (2016:290)

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Annex A: Suggested questions for a real-time review

Below are some suggested questions to include in an RTR for a Covid-19 response project. They are based around Tearfund Quality Standards (including the Core Humanitarian Standard). These suggested questions should be selected and/or adapted as needed for your specific context. Tearfund DME advisers and Thematic Support Team focal points can provide further guidance for your specific context and programme.

Behaviours
- Do the communities know what constitutes unacceptable behaviour for Tearfund and/or partner staff? Do they know how to safely report it and feel comfortable about doing it?
- To what extent has the project been delivered within budget?
- How have resources been used efficiently to implement planned activities? (eg a cost-benefit analysis of the response) How much has been spent on direct costs vs admin/support costs?

Impartiality and targeting
- How were the needs of those assisted assessed and how appropriate has the response been in relation to the needs of those assisted? How adequate was the response in terms of scale and scope?
- To what extent are the targeting criteria well known and accepted by the communities?
- How were the communities involved in deciding the selection criteria? Did the community have a chance to feed back on the beneficiary lists?

Accountability
- How are communities actively engaged in the project life cycle and how does their voice influence project activities?
- What mechanisms were in place to give communities safe ways to register any concerns or complaints? Have the communities been asked how they want to share feedback?
- How was the project adapted in response to feedback/complaints or changing context needs? How do the communities feel they influenced the project design and implementation?
- What has been the team's experience of responding to the emergency as a whole? Did they feel properly supported?

Gender
- How are gender values, norms and inequalities assessed, understood and taken into account in the response through gender-sensitive indicators and gender-sensitive activity design? Are there any challenges specific to the context?

Empowerment
- Has the capacity of the community been assessed?
- Have the communities been informed about the timeframe of the project and when it will end?

Resilience
- How does our approach and initial programming reflect a focus on the long term and local capacity to recover more quickly, and reduce the risk of future disasters? (eg through

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disaster risk reduction (DRR), reducing environmental degradation, involving people in their own recovery, impact of cash programming on the prices of goods and services etc)

Protection

- How have protection issues and vulnerable individuals & groups been identified, their location mapped and good practice protection and inclusion applied across all programming?
- Did the project complete a conflict analysis and conflict-sensitivity assessment? In what way did this influence the design of the project to ensure that it was conflict sensitive?
- Has the response produced any unintended outcomes? How have these been identified and how have they been addressed?

Technical quality

- Do the communities think that the assistance was appropriate to their needs and context?
- To what extent was the response timely? What factors have influenced Tearfund's speed of response?
- To what extent have Tearfund and partners followed agreed good practice and standards (SPHERE etc)?
- To what extent did the project incorporate learning from previous responses of a similar nature?
- What are the key lessons learnt for the organisation in terms of the delivery of an effective response in the future?
- How has the work been coordinated with other humanitarian actors, the cluster and the government?
- What alternative approaches were considered and how did Tearfund and partners choose the particular interventions?
- Has the response to the crisis achieved or is likely to achieve its intended objectives given the time available?

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