COVID19 Learning Note #3
Knowledge Management Coordination Group
Moderator – Elena Pietschmann, Regional Specialist, East and Southern Africa
9 June 2020

JLIFAD

Learning from Remote Supervision – Opportunities and challenges moving forward

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Due to COVID-19 related movement restrictions, IFAD has recently started conducting remote virtual supervision and implementation support missions across all regions. The main lessons from first experiences in both WCA and ESA are summarized below.

Challenges
One of the main challenges concerns field verification. It is difficult to involve target groups and to verify physical progress in the field, which carries the risk of producing reports that may not reflect on-the-ground realities.

Secondly, poor connectivity and participants' non-familiarity with the software or platform being used can hinder the smooth roll out of a mission. Managing the logistics for on-line meetings can take away the focus from technical work for key staff.

Thirdly, in a virtual setting mission team members do not necessarily have the opportunity for informal discussions about their views, findings, and to achieve better integration across the team members. Nor do they have the opportunity to triangulate key findings with formal and informal feedback from local stakeholders. These interactions may previously have happened over dinner, in cars, while waiting in a project or government office, etc. The mission size has also tended to increase, making coordination and the management of discussions more difficult.

Fourthly, it is more difficult for team members to focus during a virtual mission because they are not physically "away". Project team leaders (PTLs) are often leading more than one mission in parallel, with the risk that they may not be able to provide the best technical advice in all of them due to time pressures.

Lastly, the virtual supervision missions are often being conducted over consecutive, long days of meetings on-line, which may affect the capacity of team members to concentrate and engage effectively.

Opportunities
The travel restrictions have highlighted the importance and value of country presence and especially of national staff, who have seen their role reinforced. As well, the fact that mission teams are unable to travel has resulted in cost savings.

The use of technology is facilitating better engagement with government in some cases – making discussions more focused and efficient, and enabling peer learning among senior officials who may not have normally participated together in discussions.

Some tips for effective remote missions

1. Adapt planning to the context

2. Take into account digital gaps: there may be a need for the IFAD country office to use its own budget to invest in basic equipment to ensure connectivity of Project team, implementing partners and stakeholders.

3. Request tagged photos of assets with geographic coordinates for the physical verification.

4. Allow partners to familiarize themselves with the virtual platform used during the mission through training and test-runs.

5. Ask project teams to ensure that key people are accessible and have reliable connectivity.

6. Dedicate a focal point to online logistics, so that staff can focus on discussions.

7. Keep the platform open, if possible, to allow all sub-teams to convene.

8. Pilot alternative channels to connect with project target groups (for example, in Lesotho and Kenya, this was done via WhatsApp groups, in Malawi it was facilitated by project staff).

9. Extend the mission over a longer period with shorter schedules each day.

10. Learn, innovative and adapt the process after each virtual mission.

What to take forward
Some aspects of remote supervision may be worth continuing after travel restrictions are lifted. At the same time, it is key to find a balance between the benefits of remote supervision and implementation support, such as cost and time savings, and the risk of losing touch with field realities. Observations on what could be taken forward include the following:

- Virtual interaction could become an integral part of all supervision missions, as it enables broader participation in a cost-neutral manner.

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- Remote trainings, workshops and consultations could help save costs, and could be useful within projects, for example to facilitate connections between national and regional/district levels.

- Remote missions could also be useful between physical supervision missions to provide implementation support to projects and, for example, to deal with no objections. They could also enable IFAD to better support problem projects and projects at risk.

Actionable recommendations

1. **Ensure when possible that PTLs participate in no more than two missions concurrently:** this implies consultation on forward planning and scheduling across countries.

2. **Take into account the difficulties in engaging meaningfully and effectively with target groups during remote missions**, in particular due to digital gaps, and explore alternative ways to obtain their feedback.

3. **Incorporate virtual missions** into IFAD's way of working as part of more continuous engagement with clients.

Related Knowledge Resources

1. Projects' supervision can be restricted because of security worries or because of public health crises, as with the current COVID-19 pandemic. This study shows how telemedicine may offer some insights to help governments to set up an inexpensive, sustainable monitoring system that can be embedded even in lower capacity contexts. World Bank Group, 2020. What governments can learn from telemedicine to improve monitoring of construction projects. Washington, DC, World Bank Group.

2. Fragile and conflict-affected settings present many obstacles to accessing remote and insecure areas, crisis response and development operations. Digital technology can help to facilitate project supervision, monitoring and evaluation using geospatial tools. These lessons could be adapted to remote supervision during the COVID-19 pandemic. World Bank Group, 2020. Using "Pocket Science" to Monitor and Supervise Operations in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings. Washington, DC, World Bank Group.

3. During the COVID-19 crisis, extension services are critical for the immediate response, to ensure quick adoption of safe practices, maintain food safety along the value chain, and help identify and respond to issues affecting food chain continuity. IFAD developed mechanisms to continue to provide extension services while adapting to the emergency context and the government regulations in place. In this regard, both digital tools as well as decentralized farmer-centred services and delivery mechanisms are proving more valuable than ever. Aude-Even, M. and P. Nyathi, 2020. Maintaining critical extension services for smallholders during COVID-19. Rome, IFAD