Recommendations for Implementing a Frequent Monitoring Framework in Jordan

Introduction and Context

Since the start of 2016, the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) in Jordan has been working towards the development of a Frequent Monitoring Framework (FMF) to provide a shared framework to monitor the impact and outcomes of the work of the UN family in the country. To support the development of the FMF, REACH has been tasked by the Office of the United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator (UN RC/HC-O) in Jordan to assess and produce a series of recommendations on how such a framework might be structured and how an Information Management System that supports such a framework might be put together. The overall aim is to establish a data collection and aggregation mechanism for frequent monitoring of UN agencies’ resilience and development programming in Jordan, to allow the promotion of these outcomes and the easier identification of any problems and challenges.

The present paper explores existing Information Management Systems that could be incorporated into the Frequent Monitoring Framework, before making a number of recommendations around the creation and support of a FMF from both a ‘soft’ (that is to say structure and management) and ‘hard’ (technical) perspective.

Existing IMS Systems

There are a number of existent IMS in Jordan at present. These include JORISS and ActivityInfo, which are each explored in more detail below. It should be noted that the goal of the present project is not to replace or duplicate these systems but rather to explore how they might be incorporated into the Frequent Monitoring Framework.

**ActivityInfo**

The UNHCR administered ActivityInfo is used primarily by implementing partners to enter geographically-bounded data on implementation of projects. The system is mainly used to track implementation of projects by NGOs engaged in the refugee response. While the system has considerable capacity in tracking outputs and can provide very detailed data, its capacity in tracking outcome data is somewhat more limited. As such it is useful as a program tracking tool but more limited for monitoring impact.

**JORISS**

JORISS, administered by the Government of Jordan, is used primarily for project planning and tracking purposes. As such, all activities to be entered must be in line with the Jordan Response Plan, and its delineated sectors.

Discussions with partners highlighted a number of challenges with using JORISS as an IM tool. First and foremost, it is not primarily intended as such – rather it is in the first instance a planning tool. The fact that all activities must be in line with the Jordan Response Plan places considerable limits on NGOs implementing innovative – particularly resilience and development – projects not covered by a specific output of the JRP. The usefulness of JORISS for IM purposes is therefore limited.

Recommendations

Although there are existent agency and inter-agency information management systems, there is as such mechanism for collecting data on specific indicators across the different agencies. There are several arguments in favour of the creation of such a system, including:

* Improved promotion of UN Country Team work
* Improved coordination of UN efforts
* Improved visibility of UN achievements
* Improved tracking of basic indicators

Having undertaken over the previous year efforts to put in place the foundations of such a system, REACH has produced a number of lessons learned around the creation of IMS to support the Frequent Monitoring Framework. The following represent key findings around the creation of a Frequent Monitoring Framework and supporting Information Management System:

* **Fully automating a system is difficult, and any system requires regular and ad hoc support to address any problems.** Furthermore, structures should be put in place to ensure that any such system is reviewed on a regular basis, such as a steering committee. This will ensure continued agency buy-in but also will ensure that such a system remains relevant, for example by adding new indicators with agreement of the UNCT at regular intervals.
* **Collecting outcome or impact-level data is challenging on a regular basis.** Data to measure outcomes and impact of projects are not collected frequently and indeed in many cases are difficult to collect frequently. Oftentimes, planning at the project level does not include a sufficiently rigorous delineation of expected outcomes or inputs, which are frequently either too specific to be useful for the UN family as a whole, or too general to be collected on a regular basis. Further efforts should be undertaken to encourage agencies to think creatively and technically about how data on outcomes and impact can be collected, and to put in place if possible innovative data collection solutions to these challenges. Greater engagement with beneficiaries, for example, in collecting outcome data could be facilitated by the use of technology – Jordan, with a relatively good level of infrastructure, is a good country to put in place such a system.

Despite the considerable challenges involved, most of the agencies engaged with were receptive to the idea of creating a UN family-level IMS. There are two main approaches to how this could be achieved; 1) consolidate existing agency and inter-agency (including ActivityInfo) systems, and 2) creation of a new system. Both of these two options have positive and negative aspects. In the first instance, systems that are already in existence are largely functioning well and see a high level of engagement with agencies. Despite this, these systems are designed in such a way as to make incorporating them into other systems difficult. The second options has the advantage that it can be made more tailored to the specific needs of the project and that such a system is not highly difficult to make, REACH decided to opt for the second option.

There are two approaches to the creation of a new data management system. The first is an open-input system in which data is cleaned and managed in the database, with outputs being produced by a technician. This was the system used for the two dashboard outputs produced. The system has the advantages that it allows data submission in a number of formats, but a considerable disadvantage in that data cleaning is a laborious and time-intensive process. Further, submissions in different formats presents challenges in terms of harmonising inconsistencies between data made available, especially in terms of different timeframes and levels of disaggregation. The second system involves closed inputs and automatically generated outputs. This system is much easier to manage as data can only be input in certain formats and required much less management and cleaning. Given the advantages, REACH selected the second system.

A pilot IMS has been produced that shows how the front-end of such a system might be presented using a WebApp. A database management system has also been developed that can produce real-time outputs showing and tracking the data. The demonstration of the platform can be found [here](https://fmf.reach-info.org/).

With regards the management of such a system, REACH makes the following recommendations to ensure smooth and effective management of the system by the UN family:

* **Indicators** should be **direct**, **concise**, and allow **extrapolation of the impact of programming**. Overly complex or difficult to define indicators are difficult to build buy-in around and do not give sufficient evaluation of the outcomes of programming. Furthermore, indicators should be directly related to the UN SPDF and relevant for UN programming in the country.
* **One focal point per agency** should be assigned to the Frequent Monitoring Framework. This should ideally be an M&E officer or Information Management officer.
* **Indicators should be developed with all agencies.** There should be agreement on indicators at an agency level in order to ensure buy-in and that indicators are feasible. Generally speaking, there is a mix in terms of the levels of understanding around indicators, and agencies should be encouraged to engage actively in this process.
* New systems should be **clear in their purpose and scope and not seek to compete with initiatives with a different scope**. In particular, it should be clear that the IMS system for the FMF does not seek to replicate or displace ActivityInfo, but rather is a standalone system in support of its own structure.
* **Any new system should not overburden agencies and should be integrated as closely as possible with existing M&E systems**. Indicators included should be collected on a regular basis by agencies. The fact that different agencies have very different capacities and goals with regards to Monitoring and Evaluation means that there are very different data available from each, and the IMS should be tailored to reflect this reality. Agency specific M&E procedures oftentimes mitigate against coherent and comparable data collection, as do internal reporting lines. Without more top-down management of such a system internal to agencies the scope of data collected will be limited.
* **The utility and benefit of a new system should be immediately obvious, otherwise it will not gain buy-in.** As far as possible, the system should be presented as a finished article, capable of producing high quality outputs from the outset, as agencies often lack the time and manpower required to assist in putting in place such a system.
* **An automated reminder and follow-up system should be in place to ensure timely input and updating of data.** A particular challenge faced during the previous rounds was lack of or delayed responsiveness of agencies when submission requests were sent, which often delayed the process and the overall finalisation of the dashboard.
* **Capacity around designing outcome and impact indicators should be enhanced.** There is occasionally a tendency for outcome indicators to be made either too general or too specific, rather than looking at data that can effectively be collected by different agencies to measure outcomes. Realistic, well-constructed outcomes are necessary to underpin any system and more attention should be paid to these.
* **Explore innovative methods of data collection.** Related to the point above, UN agencies should be encouraged to explore innovative methods of collecting data, and especially outcome and impact level data, using innovative methods such as direct data collection from beneficiaries using mobile devices. This could considerably streamline data collection, allow for more frequent data collection, and broaden the scope of outcome data that is collected on a regular basis. Such platforms can be developed relatively cheaply and maintained quite easily.