Adapting Research Approaches for COVID-19 Decision-Making

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Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic affects almost every aspect of conducting the high-quality research—i.e., assessments, evaluations, and special studies—needed for development decision-making. Travel restrictions, the vulnerability of certain groups, and, in the case of COVID-19, the risks associated with personal interaction, affect the methods we can use, the types of data we can collect, and the questions we can ask. As we adapt to working under the constraints imposed by COVID-19, we are finding that many of the methods and management processes we have developed for working in insecure countries also apply to health-insecure environments.

This paper was prepared by MSI staff to contribute to the discussion and understanding of the important development challenges facing policymakers and practitioners

Adapting Research Approaches to Insecure Environments

Most research evolves through four phases: design, planning and preparation, fieldwork, and analysis and reporting. COVID-19, and the measures taken to curb the spread of the disease, require adapting methods and management approaches to each phase to produce reliable, relevant, and timely information.

Design

Effective designs must articulate clear and feasible objectives, employ context-appropriate methods, and appropriately balance the oft-competing considerations of research scope, reliability of information, timeliness, cost, and practicality. In contexts that limit travel and contact it is especially important to:

- Limit the scope of the research to focus on information required for the most critical decisions.
- Collect information that is good enough to support a decision. Some decisions require precise quantitative estimates; for others, well-triangulated qualitative evidence may suffice.
- Explore secondary sources for data that is sufficiently relevant and granular to answer research questions. For evaluations, progress or third-party monitoring reports that reflect on the effectiveness of interventions can be fruitful secondary data sources.

Planning and Preparation

Travel restrictions may prevent some team members, often team leads, from physically participating in planning exercises. Prohibitions on meeting in groups can also compromise the quality of collaboration needed to efficiently plan the research, develop and pretest data collection instruments, and prepare for conducting surveys or interviews. To partially mitigate these challenges:

- Develop a data analysis plan. This is good practice regardless of operational challenges. Data analysis planning provides a structure for remote collaboration. It will also help the team weigh tradeoffs between alternative data sources and methods and more quickly develop appropriate and efficient data collection instruments.
- Use technology-based tools for collaboration, such as Skype or Zoom, to facilitate collaboration when travel restrictions prevent the entire research team from assembling in one place.
- When active participation is important (e.g., training on complex data collection instruments), adapt training materials and processes to a remote format. If some travel is possible, bring the team together in a mutually accessible location.

Data Collection

By restricting access to field locations and how field teams interact with research subjects, insecurity and other risk factors most affect primary data collection. The most

suitable strategies for collecting data in these environments depend on the situation. Some approaches we have found effective include:

- Conducting interviews by telephone or administering surveys online or through text messaging when travel or personal contact is inadvisable. Recognize that these approaches may introduce bias by restricting interview subjects to those with access to the appropriate technology.

- Transporting residents of insecure areas to nearby secure areas for interviews or surveys when travel from the insecure area is not restricted.

- Locating an accessible proxy population that can provide data on the experiences or opinions of an inaccessible population. For example, displaced persons who have not yet returned to their (inaccessible) area of origin may be a suitable proxy for those who have recently returned.

- When applicable (e.g., for visible infrastructure or land use), exploring remote sensing approaches.

- Analyzing social media data when relevant. For example, analyzing mentions of disease symptoms may provide advance warning of an outbreak.

Managing Data Quality in the Field
Travel restrictions to or in the field often make it difficult for key team members, often team leads, to monitor data collection to correct interviewing errors or adapt interviews to new information. To maintain data quality in these situations:

- Thoroughly orient interviewers to the purpose of the research and use mock interviews and, when possible, field pretests to practice using the instruments.

Pay special attention to giving feedback on probing so interviewers understand how to elicit the desired information.

- Monitor data collection remotely by recording interviews and obtaining professionally produced, translated transcripts as quickly as possible. Complete transcripts allow the (absent) team lead to provide timely feedback on interview techniques. If practical, it is most efficient to provide this feedback during regular telephone calls with the field team.

- When applicable, practice conducting interviews in a manner that complies with health-related guidance. When scheduling interviews, explain to respondents the precautions interviewers will take to reduce risks, provide alternatives, and obtain the subject's consent.

Analysis and Reporting
Analysis and reporting are highly collaborative internal processes. When the entire team cannot assemble in the country, use technology-based tools for collaboration or meet in a mutually accessible location.