



## REMOTE MANAGEMENT IN HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS

Lessons learned from  
Libya and beyond

Remotely managing humanitarian operations is increasingly becoming a key implementation modality by international NGOs. With this development it is paramount that actors engaging in the humanitarian field recognize the value of Remote Management, while also keeping an eye on the key challenges inherent to the shift to Remote Management. Building on an evaluation of a project managed by DRC's Mine Action Unit, Danish Demining Group, this Brief offers an overview of some of the challenges of Remote Management and proposes a way forward.

### Introduction

Remote Management is usually the result of a reduction or complete cessation of access of senior international management staff to the area of implementation, while continuing operations by transferring responsibilities to local staff or partners. Senior managers will thus remotely oversee the implementation of project activities by local staff or partners with limited or no access to the areas of operations. Remotely managing operations thus allows humanitarian organisations to continue operating in environments with limited humanitarian access.

As humanitarian organisations are increasingly operating in conflict-affected areas and complex settings, it is more frequently necessary to operate using Remote Management. From having previously been considered a temporary solution to access problems, Remote Management is now increasingly becoming a standard operating procedure.

This Evaluation and Learning Brief seeks to summarise some of the challenges and benefits

arising from Remote Management. The Brief is based on an evaluation implemented in March 2015 of a remotely managed Armed Violence Reduction project in Libya implemented by Danish Demining Group (DDG). The evaluation included a quantitative and qualitative assessment of the project, with a focus on the project's relevance, effectiveness and sustainability. The evaluation was informed by interviews with project staff in Tunis, field staff in Sabha, headquarter staff, the donor, as well as a focus group with project beneficiaries in Sabha. This evaluation brief is furthermore informed by an extensive literature review of other organisations' experience with Remote Management.

### DRC and DDG in Libya

Danish Refugee Council (DRC) has been working in Libya since April 2011. In April 2014 DDG received funding for a 12 month programme titled Armed Violence Reduction (AVR) in the Southern City of Sabha from the UK Conflict Pool. The programme had the overall objective to support local and national efforts to promote peace, stability and reconciliation in Sabha, Libya, by working with civil

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**“FOR DRC/DDG, THE SHIFT TO REMOTE MANAGEMENT CAUSED SEVERAL ACTIVITIES TO BE CANCELLED, AS THEY REQUIRED THE PRESENCE OF INTERNATIONAL TECHNICAL EXPERTISE.”**

society and government to promote and enable positive, peace-affirming activities, and to foster closer ties between them.

The operating environment in Sabha was very fragile. In the beginning of 2014 the Arab tribe of Awlad Sulayman and the Tobou tribe clashed in the city and the conflict intensified when Qadhahfa and Maqarha militias attacked military bases in and around the city. In July the security situation in the country deteriorated to a point where it was no longer feasible to have international staff in Libya and UN agencies, embassies, international NGOs, etc. evacuated staff including DRC/DDG.

From July 2014 until today DDG and DRC's programming in Libya has been managed remotely from offices in Tunis and Zarzis in Tunisia.

### **Challenges in Remote Management – experiences from Sabha and beyond**

#### ***No one plans to shift to Remote Management***

Security and stability can deteriorate rapidly in the areas of humanitarian operations and evacuation of international staff therefore often happens with short notice and limited prior planning. The short-term organisational shock has a negative impact as projects can grind to a halt until Remote Management procedures are established and staff have adapted to new roles and responsibilities. Shifting to Remote Management thus often entails cancellation and delays of activities in the short run, which it may not be possible to make up for in the long-run, because contingency planning often is lacking.

This was also visible in DRC/DDG's operations. The DRC Strategic Programme Document 2014 for Libya/Tunisia does not mention the possible need for Remote Management, despite the fact that tensions had been growing in the country throughout 2013. However, in the AVR programme document, it is highlighted that there was a high risk of major deterioration in the overall political and security situation, and furthermore that most programme activities can be operated remotely. In spite of this, the shift to Remote Management, in combination with other factors, resulted in project activities coming almost to a stand-still during the period from July to October 2014, showing that despite the security risk being identified, little effort had been made to thoroughly plan for remotely managing activities.

***“I was hoping to be trained by really experienced international trainers”*** Focus group participant, Sabha, March 4, 2015

Humanitarian organisations and donors generally accept that there is a trade-off between continuing operations through Remote Management and ensuring high quality of operations. When operations shift to Remote Management, the opportunities to transfer international expertise to local partners and beneficiaries is limited.

For DRC/DDG, the shift to Remote Management caused several activities to be cancelled, as they required the presence of international technical expertise. The activities that were implemented by Remote Management also saw a decrease in quality, based on the feedback of beneficiaries, who complained about the trainings implemented by local staff. One should, however, also be aware of stereotypical understandings of “who” can be an expert, and beneficiaries may be more receptive to trainings conducted by international rather than local staff.

The contribution of the activities implemented is thus reduced, sometimes drastically, depending on the level of technical expertise needed in the operations. The capacity gap between the local and international staff can also mean that the project outcomes will not be sustainable and additional trainings will be needed in order to ensure that beneficiaries gain the required technical expertise.

***“The move to Remote Management represents a negative shift because of weak communication”*** Focus group participant, Sabha, March 4, 2015

Shifts to Remote Management mean that the daily operations become difficult to manage. Coordinating activities with other agencies, monitoring implementation and following up with beneficiaries are all complicated by the fact that managers are no longer present in the area of implementation. It likewise becomes increasingly difficult for beneficiaries to hold the implementing agencies accountable, as they are limited in their ability to follow up with senior management staff. Accountability towards donors is also reduced, as the opportunities to monitor and document activities decrease. Coordination with other implementing organisations also becomes difficult, as e.g. in Sabha DDG local staff did not have experience communicating with international organisations and furthermore only a few staff were able to communicate in other languages than Arabic. Shifting to Remote

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Management can thus create an accountability gap which can be difficult to bridge.

***Bunkerisation, risk transfer and “remote management trap”***

When Remote Management is used for extended periods of time, international staff become not only physically detached from the communities, partners and beneficiaries they are supporting and assisting, but also increasingly socially and mentally detached. Humanitarian organisations often have high staff turnover, so when implementing through Remote Management they may face the situation of senior management staff that have never been in the country or area of implementation, or met with local staff, partners and beneficiaries. This limits their ability to fully understand the local operational environment and can heighten local staff’s exposure to risk. While the shift to Remote Management therefore may entail a security benefit for international staff, it may just transfer risk to local staff, as indicated by the sharp rise in attacks on national aid workers. This was not experienced in the DRC/DDG operation, as they were able to retain key programme management staff, but in the medium to long term, should implementation through Remote Management continue, this will arise as a challenge.

Bunkerisation can furthermore lead to tensions and internal divisions between field staff and international staff. Being removed from the field, international staff can have a tendency to overcompensate for their lack of presence by engaging in extensive monitoring which can lead to a poor working environment where national staff interpret this as a sign of lack of trust and derogatory attitudes. Bunkerisation may also result in the so-called remote management trap whereby it becomes increasingly difficult to reverse the process and move back to normal, in-area management. As international staff lose familiarity with the operational environment they may overestimate the dangers international staff can be exposed to, which can create an organisational resistance to returning.

**Benefits of using Remote Management**

Due to the challenges of Remote Management, organisations are often faced with tough resource allocation considerations, as the limitations imposed by Remote Management can lead organisations to shift their resources to more accessible areas. Continuing operations through Remote Management rather than ceasing operations, however, also entails a number of benefits in addition to upholding the humanitarian imperative of providing humanitarian assistance wherever it is needed. These are important for humanitarian organisations to take into consideration and to explore how they can be maximized.

***“Remote Management represents a very positive opportunity to improve our skills and our experience of taking responsibility”***

DDG field staff, Sabha, March 2, 2015

As mentioned by a local DDG field staff in Sabha, Libya, shifting to Remote Management does not only entail transferring risk, but also transferring responsibility to local staff. This helps to increase the local ownership, as local staff will be more engaged in decision-making processes and design of interventions. Shifting to Remote Management also requires skills to be transferred from international to local staff and increased focus on capacity building. By building the capacities and increasing ownership among local staff, humanitarian organisations are contributing to heightening the skill level in the community both within the specific sector, but also general skills related to project management, communication and language. This skill transfer helps to build sustainability of the interventions among key local actors.

***Trust and credibility among local partners and communities***

By continuing operations through Remote Management, humanitarian organisations are able to remain present in the communities and continue a level of engagement with local partners, stakeholders and beneficiaries. This helps to build trust and confidence among the local communities that humanitarian organisations do not leave them behind, when the operational environment deteriorates. In the context of DDG/DRC’s operations in Libya, this was an important factor, especially in light of the challenges that DRC faced with regard to building trust with local stakeholders and authorities. The main trust and credibility-related benefits arising from continuing operations through Remote Management are seen in the long-term, as it makes it easier to shift back to normal operations and re-establish a presence. It furthermore contributes to heightening participation and engagement in future activities in the local area by partners and beneficiaries. DRC/DDG are thus among only a small number of humanitarian organisations that have maintained a presence in Libya, which has contributed to building a stronger relationship with national authorities and will enable a quicker re-establishment of normal management procedures should the environment improve.

***Innovation and cost-saving***

Remote Management forces organisations to re-think intervention modes and develop innovative approaches to implementation. This can help to increase efficiency and lower cost. In DRC/DDG’s operations in Libya, photos of project activities were likewise appreciated by the donor as means of documentation. DRC/

DDG furthermore experienced that administrative costs were reduced due to the shift to Remote Management. Evacuating international staff lowered costs related to security and logistics and DRC/DDG were thereby able to implement activities with less administrative overhead costs.

### Remote Management going forward

With the increasing complexity in the humanitarian operational environment, Remote Management is likely to become a permanent feature of humanitarian organisations' operating procedures. If Remote Management is done correctly the challenges it poses to the quality of humanitarian operations can be limited. DRC has a chapter in their Operations Handbook dedicated to outlining policy, principles and minimal operational procedures for Remote Management. These are designed to minimize the negative impact of shifting to Remote Management, for instance by trying to ensure that transfer of responsibilities from international management staff to local staff is limited and thereby also the transfer of risk.

### Increased focus on planning for Remote Management

Emergencies can erupt at a moment's notice and require a shift to Remote Management. But planning is often lacking, which leads to implementation gaps. Indeed, DRC's Operations Handbook does specify that a basic remote management plan must be produced as part of the evacuation plan. However, in the case of DRC/DDG's operation in Libya, limited planning had been done for Remote Management, and there is clearly a gap between principles in the Operations Handbook and actual operations. Planning for Remote Management should be an integral part of country operational plans and could therefore be included in country strategy documents. Country offices should develop thorough remote management plans including training plans of national staff, as well as assessment of key operational gaps that would occur if a shift to Remote Management were to occur. This requires that country operations allocate the necessary resources and support to translate the Operations Handbook into actions.

### Internal knowledge sharing

With Remote Management still being a relatively new mode of operation for many humanitarian organisations including DRC/DDG, there is a need to increase focus on internal knowledge sharing. Specifically, innovative ideas and approaches that have been used in other countries, as well as training and planning tools, should be shared internally as well as externally with other organisations .

### Further reading

JMW Consulting (2015): *Project Evaluation: Armed Violence Reduction (AVR) in the Southern City of Sabha*

Lisa Schreter & Adele Harmer (2013): *Delivering Aid in highly insecure environments: A critical review of the literature 2007-2012*, Humanitarian Outcomes Ltd., London, UK

Sarah Collinson, Mark Duffield, Carol Berger, Diana Felix da Costa and Karl Sandstrom (2013): *Paradoxes of Presence: Risk management and aid culture in challenging environments*, Humanitarian Policy Group.

### Credits

This Evaluation and Learning Brief was written by Alexander Kjærøum, the team leader of the evaluation of the DDG project in Sabha (JMW Consulting, 2015). Alexander is Project Leader at JMW Consulting and has worked on a multitude of projects in Libya since 2012. He holds a Master's Degree in Political Science from University of Copenhagen.

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