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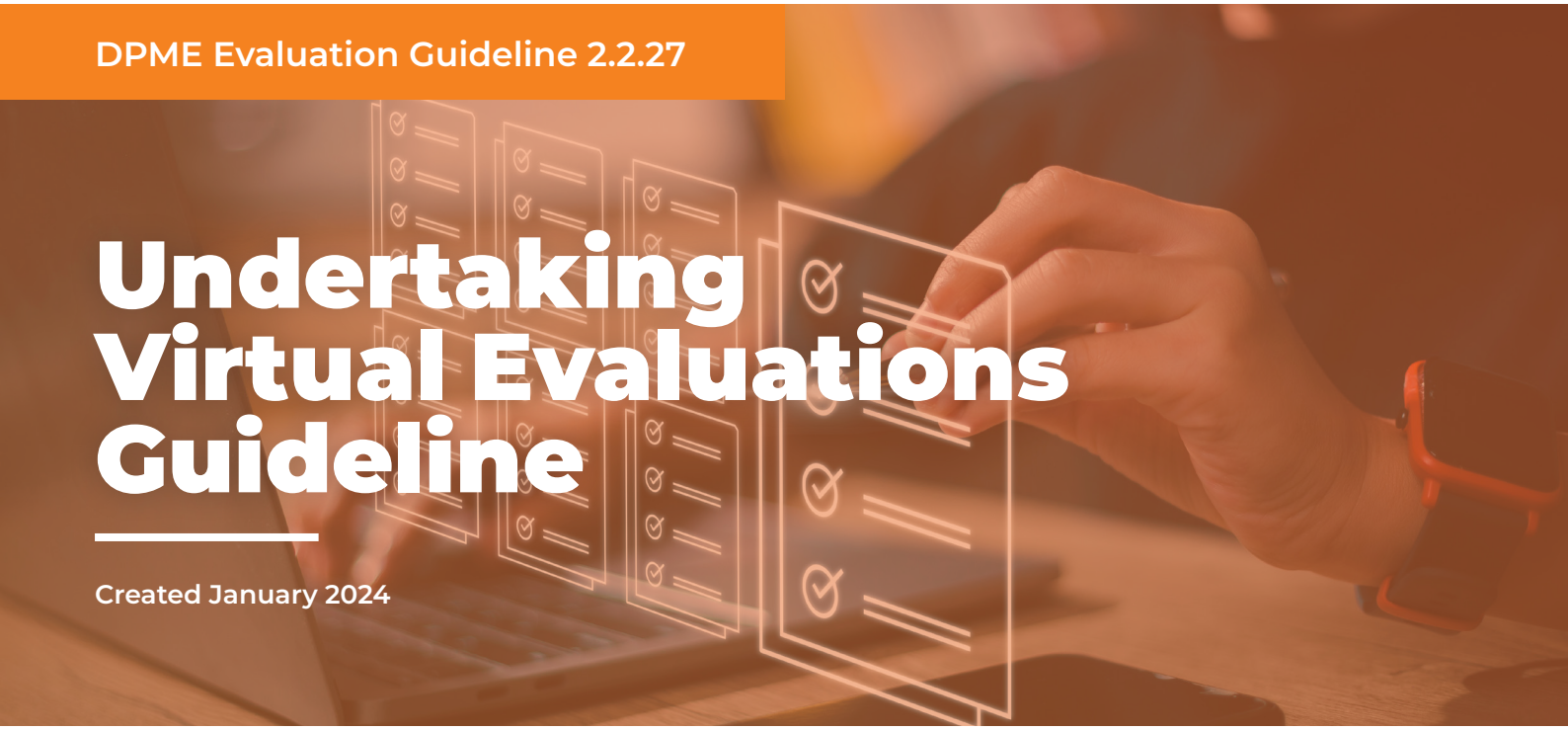

Undertaking Virtual Evaluations Guideline

Created January 2024

Addressed to	Government departments who are undertaking evaluations (programme managers and M&E staff).
Purpose	The purpose of this Guideline is to give practical guidance on how to undertake virtual evaluations.
Policy reference	This guideline should be read in conjunction with the • National Evaluation Policy Framework 2019 and all DPME Guidelines
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1 Introduction

Rapid technological advancement is changing the way we work and interact, leading to increased remote working, online communication and the development of tools and technologies which support evaluation. These changes have implications for how evaluations are planned, undertaken and disseminated, as virtual evaluation has become accepted and is increasingly widespread. This guideline, developed via a co-creative process aims to provide practical and actionable advice on conducting virtual and hybrid evaluations at national-, provincial- and local levels in South Africa.

It provides tailored advice for the South African context drawing on available literature. The guideline is relevant to evaluation commissioners, programme and project managers as well as evaluation implementers, students, researchers and the broader evaluation community interested in strengthening their practice of virtual evaluation. Over time, the guideline will be refined with more approaches, methods and tools, drawing on lessons learned from practice.

This guideline may be used when conducting evaluations virtually during extraordinary times such as during the pandemic, natural disasters, or other situations where the evaluator or evaluation participants have access limitations (e.g. evaluators and participants with disabilities); where

the evaluation participants are disbursed across locations; or to reduce travel time and costs and the evaluation carbon footprint. The guideline is applicable to emergencies and 'everyday' circumstances.

The guideline is structured as follows:

- It defines virtual evaluation and summarises pertinent aspects of the South African context.
- It provides important principles to inform a virtual evaluation.
- It lays out steps for "how to" undertake a virtual evaluation, with a specific focus on planning, data collection and presenting results/facilitating feedback; relevant approaches, methods and tools which can assist with these are presented.
- It considers pertinent challenges and limitations of virtual evaluation.
- It concludes by outlining critical ethical considerations.

Annexes 1-3 include further detailed guidance on data governance and references.

2 What is virtual[1] evaluation

Box 1: Definition of a virtual evaluation

A virtual evaluation is the adaptation of an evaluation design and methodology, whereby planning, data collection, data analysis and reporting, take place in a different location separate from where the initiative was implemented i.e. in-person activities are replaced with online or digital, interaction, which can be in-person, but without physical contact. Virtual evaluations can be undertaken throughout the evaluation cycle or at key steps e.g. design in-person but undertake data collection virtually. It typically differs from traditional evaluation practice by increasing the use of technology for primary data collection and use of secondary data.

3 Why consider a virtual evaluation?

Typically, a virtual evaluation will be considered when a face-to-face evaluation is not possible or advisable. The rationale may include:

- **Generating evidence during crisis times , e.g. natural disasters, humanitarian challenges and pandemics:** These can create unforeseen interruptions in the traditional approaches to conducting evaluations. Moreover, during such times the need for data to understand the effectiveness of interventions may be more urgent. Virtual evaluations may offer an alternative in such situations, to ensure that the evaluation can still inform learning and decision-making.
- **Safety:** During certain crises, it is critical to protect staff and evaluation participants. Remote approaches reduce the need to meet physically and can enable social distancing such as that required during some pandemics. Caution should be taken not to overburden staff and participants who are likely to be stressed by various factors relating to and going beyond the current crisis.

[1] Note: the words 'virtual', 'remote', and 'digitally remote' are used interchangeably throughout this guideline to refer to virtual evaluation.

- **Efficiency and reach:** Given that data is collected remotely – depending on the methods and tools used - efficiencies and broader geographic coverage and reach may be possible.
- **Increased inclusion:** In some situations, virtual evaluation may increase inclusion, e.g. using aerial footage to collect data in hard-to-reach areas, ensuring that remote locations are not left behind. Further, it may allow individuals and groups that are physically not accessible to participate as evaluators or participants. However, increased inclusion is not guaranteed[2].
- **Resource constraints:** Virtual evaluations generally cost less than in-person engagements, due to reduced travel costs and associated subsistence. This may make evaluations more affordable and viable for some organisations in the context of resource constraints.
- **Reduced carbon footprint:** In-person engagement typically involves substantive travel, which has an associated carbon footprint, while virtual evaluations can contribute to the reduction of the carbon footprint.
- **National- and local evaluation capacity strengthening:** Virtual evaluations and reduced travel may increase opportunities for, and investment in, the capacity development of national and local evaluation actors, rather than international evaluators. Thus, national and local evaluation actors could get greater recognition and actively contribute with their understanding of context, which may lead to the use of M&E approaches and methods which are best suited to the local context. Long-term relationships can help establish trust between donors, international non-governmental organisations, national and local actors as well as assist in overcoming the challenges inherent in remote M&E (Building Markets & Orange Door Research, 2018).
- **Use of technologies and innovation:** Virtual evaluation presents opportunities to accelerate the exploration of accessing and utilising new technologies such as drones, machine learning and artificial intelligence. It is likely to incentivise the evaluation community to reconsider previously underutilised tools such as social media, all of which can be used for in-person, hybrid and digitally remote evaluations.

4 Key features of the South African context affecting virtual evaluations

Digital literacy and **access to electricity and technology** are critical for engaging participants in virtual evaluation. Whilst the proportion of South Africa's digitally literate population could not be identified when developing this guide, access to electricity and technology has increased significantly in recent years, according to the 2020 General Household Survey, (STATSA, 2021).

- In 2020, 90% of households were connected to a main electricity supply.
- In 2019, 87.8% of households only used cellular phones as a means of communication. Statista (2023) reported that in 2023 one third of the population used smartphones.
- 74.1% of South African households (Labuschagne, 2021) had at least one member who had access to, or used the internet at their homes, work, place of study, internet cafés, or public hotspots.

In South Africa, there is a digital divide between those who have and do not have access to and can and cannot use mobile devices, - a particular issue for rural areas. The digital divide includes: "lack of a device, inability to pay for airtime, poor network connectivity, lack of electricity, cultural, gender, disability and age barriers to mobile access, literacy and language and others" (Raftree, 2021, p6).

Radio does not require digital access and is an inclusive and popular form of communication and entertainment. In 2021, about 80% of South Africans had tuned into a radio station within the last seven days, with most people listening on traditional radio sets. There were reportedly 40 commercial and public broadcast stations and 284 community stations in South Africa (Bosch, 2022). The latter is especially important given the use of radio in community engagement, as it will provide a useful platform to inform communities on a virtual evaluation undertaken within their communities and to disseminate evaluation findings and recommendations in communities.

[2] Challenges relating to inclusion are discussed in Section 9.

5 Principles for virtual evaluation

The following guiding principles have been adapted from an Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) publication for the 'M&E during COVID-19 series' (Buchanan-Smith, 2021, p5) contextualised for the South African context.

1. **Be open to adaptation and flexible to new ways of doing things throughout the evaluation process:** For instance, on objectives, scope and methods.
2. **Proactively communicate and collaborate:** From national to provincial and local levels, via regional offices, implementing partners and other networks, to assess needs, share experience and learn together.
3. **Do no harm:** This principle is particularly important during times of crises – prioritise the safety of the evaluand[3] and evaluation team throughout the evaluation process.
4. **Understand the context:** Prioritising understanding of the local/implementation context is important for undertaking any evaluation, but even more so when an evaluation is conducted remotely. This can be done by researching the local area/programme, reviewing documents and data, engaging with local key informants and ensuring that context is considered when developing data collection instruments.
5. **Consider biases[4] and prioritise inclusivity:** It is particularly important when data is collected remotely to consider unequal access to communication technology and how this can be mitigated.
6. **Uphold minimum standards:** Evaluation results must be 'good enough' regarding relevance, credibility and timeliness.
7. **Use lessons learned from other virtual evaluations/ research and anticipate future needs:** Draw on the wealth of evaluation experience relating to similar situations.
8. **Ensure the utility of the evaluation:** Assess the evaluand and organisational needs, and engage with stakeholders to ensure that the evaluation findings will be used.

6 Planning a virtual evaluation

This section unpacks the planning stage in the virtual evaluation cycle of planning, data collection and reporting which are discussed in turn. This does not repeat what is in the DPME Guideline on Developing TORs for Evaluation (DPME, 2014).

At the planning stage, particular issues for conducting virtual evaluations around evaluation design and methods include (Chaplowe et al, 2021):

1. **Conduct an evaluability assessment if possible:** To understand if a virtual evaluation is viable and to ensure that an evaluation is practical, feasible and useful. Will sufficient, relevant evidence be available, and what kind of evaluation should be conducted? A helpful checklist of critical questions to ask when undertaking an evaluability assessment has been compiled by Davies (2013).
2. **Consider the timing of the evaluation:** How will the context and any ongoing crisis impact the evaluation's feasibility? If required, the evaluation units may consider delaying, rescheduling or combining planned evaluations into thematic[5] evaluations.
3. **Understand the context:** It is critical to involve local counterparts in evaluation processes early to better prepare for remote evaluations and to understand the local context. Evaluators need to understand the context more thoroughly before starting evaluation data collection as it helps with better scoping of critical stakeholders, secondary data sources and other analytical work.
4. **Consider whether you will use a rapid evaluation[6]:** When selecting the type of evaluation, it becomes critical to assess who will be available to respond to requests for data; this will assist the design of the evaluation. List the limitations and impact on the overall evaluation quality in terms of limited methodology and scope. In that case, it may be advisable to scale down an evaluation's geographic, temporal or thematic scope by using smaller sample sizes, employing purposeful sampling and/or reducing the number of evaluation questions answered. Alternative evaluative approaches can be considered if a full-scale evaluation is not possible, as indicated below.

3 Evaluand refers to a programme, policy, product, object, performance, or any other entity being evaluated.
4 Bias is the tendency to favour a particular point of view and to present that view instead of other equally valid alternatives.
5 Thematic evaluations assess specific aspects, themes and processes, and may also focus on particular departments, issues, or approaches. Thematic evaluations provide the means to explore the effectiveness and impact of particular approaches in-depth and are typically used towards the end of interventions.
6 Rapid evaluations are typically conducted in a maximum period of 12 weeks (DPME, 2020a). Feedback may be provided during the evaluation field work, as well as afterwards and the ultimate intention is to improve the project or programme concerned through generating learning and recommendations.

5. **Consider utilising self-evaluations or reviews:** There is the option to forego commissioning an external evaluation and conduct a self-assessment with the programme- or project implementation team. Subject to the resource allocation, this can have lower budget implications and a higher level of ownership and learning. However, this approach has an inherent risk of bias, and skilled evaluators/facilitators would need to be involved in supporting the process. The DPME guideline on **evaluative workshops**[7] provides guidance in this regard, as does an ALNAP guide (Buchanan-Smith & Morrison-Metois, 2021) which outlines many forms of internal learning such as Real-Time Reviews, Real-Time Assessments, Rapid Reviews, Emergency response reviews and After Action reviews.
6. **Review evaluation questions:** A sharper focus may be needed when drafting or reviewing evaluation questions for a virtual or hybrid evaluation or one conducted during times of crisis (Raimondo et al, 2020). Some respondents might be more difficult or impossible to reach through remote data collection. How will the virtual nature of the evaluation affect what questions you can answer and the quality of the answers you get? Documenting your decision-making processes will help you address questions about possible limitations and trade-offs.
7. **Maximise the use of secondary data:** In virtual evaluations, secondary data can play an even more important role, as collection of primary data can be more challenging. More time may therefore be needed to source and analyse secondary data.

7 Remote data collection

This section considers remote data collection.

There are a range of platforms and tools for collecting qualitative and quantitative data from people without direct interaction. Approaches for data gathering include using phones or internet-enabled cell phones for telephonic interviews and surveys; computers for web-based focus group discussions or interviews, and satellite imagery. Consider the following:

1. **Third-party data collection:** Community-based groups with a strong local network can be used to collect data in-person, while the main evaluator is remote. This should be seen as an opportunity to build local capacities and capabilities. However, local power dynamics and potential biases should be considered when deciding if this is appropriate. It is critical to ensure that there is a good briefing and proper training and that local data collectors are appropriately compensated for their time.
2. **Informed consent:** Be sure to document informed consent given remotely, as referred to in the Data Ethics Section 10. Consent forms should ideally be signed before data is collected. If this is not possible, this should be requested verbally and recorded, before the start of any virtual data collection, and information about the study should be provided verbally and sent as a follow-up.
3. **Simplify data collection:** People will give up before completion if an online or cell phone survey is complicated, long, too detailed, dull, or off-putting. Where possible, use voice messaging instead of SMS, which can assist where literacy is low or if people use small phones that are difficult to type on. Consider using WhatsApp or other communication applications to collect photos and videos of evidence or stories. Offer a choice of languages to help ensure that people can comfortably express themselves. Pilot to see what time of day gets the best response rate. Engage people through existing platforms rather than introducing new ones (GOARN RCCE Working Group, 2020).
4. **Track response rates:** Track response rates to surveys and interviews carefully and have a protocol for how many times and in which manner you will attempt to reach individual respondents. Keep records of whom you try to contact, whom you successfully reach, and

7 An evaluative workshop is an internally driven evaluative exercise which can be undertaken in varying circumstances such as when a programme is being reviewed or during times of crisis. An evaluative workshops can range in duration from 2 hours to 3-days and is typically a small scale, internal exercise that can be led by programme managers working closely with M&E practitioners within an organisation (DPME, 2020b).

how these groups vary by type of respondent. For example, should you be interested in speaking to both government officials and project participants, you may have an easier time reaching government officials, who may have better access to communication technology. Project participants might be less responsive for reasons already mentioned – always keep track of responses.

5. **Triangulation and validation:** Triangulation of data collected from different types of respondents and via the use of different methods can help provide a balanced perspective and minimise bias (see Section 9). During remote data collection, there should be sessions for 'validating evaluation findings' instead of 'sharing evaluation findings.' A range of stakeholders, including those from whom data was collected and 'critical friends' should be invited to the validation session.
6. **Reporting:** If a rapid evaluation is being undertaken, consider the reporting issues suggested in that guideline (DPME, 2020a). To engage with communities without internet or cellular coverage, community programming, radio engagement and leveraging community services (taxis, buses and billboards with information in local languages) can be considered to disseminate information. In committing to this type of reporting, evaluators should fully understand the time and resources required for these forms of presentation.
7. **Document lessons learned:** Carefully consider and document the potential effects of shifting to virtual evaluation and remote data collection. This will help identify possible mitigation methods throughout the evaluation process (Winrock International, 2020). Learning should be shared in the organisation undertaking the evaluation and with the evaluation community to build on good practices. Undertaking a virtual evaluation presents opportunities to explore new methods and data collection tools and techniques, which can improve practice. It is critical to remain flexible and open to exploring new ways of conducting evaluations.

Table 1 summarises virtual solutions that are commonly used for evaluation data collection activities. It was adopted from other sources (Mercy Corps, 2020; DFAT, 2021), adapted and strengthened for this guide.

Method	When to use this method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Document and data review	At the start of the evaluation, to acquire an important understanding of context and key facts and focus the evaluation. Existing documents and programmes are key sources of information for virtual evaluations.	• Relatively low-cost providing documents and data exist/can be sourced. • Can provide important background/ contextual information.	• There may be limited documents/ data available; what exists may be outdated and/or of poor quality. • Existing documents and data may provide a limited or unbalanced perspective.
Mobile Survey Data Collection Tools[8], such as SMS/text message.	SMS/text message data collection is an appropriate method to use to ask a small number of targeted questions of a large literate population, for whom telephone numbers are available. This method does not allow for in-depth discussion on specific topics and thus should usually be used in conjunction with other methods which do.	• Can provide anonymity. • Can be used with large sample sizes. • Can be used for sending out bulk information. • Not reliant on having a smartphone, can be done with almost any type of phone. • Relatively low cost.	• Limited length of survey. • Low response rate, as there is often no incentive/gain from responding. • Relies on already having phone numbers of the target group and permission to use this as per local law (i.e. POPIA) – see Section 10. • Participants may incur a cost for which they should be compensated. • Privacy considerations – networks may be government controlled, or data may be intercepted. • Relies on good signal and electricity to charge the phone. • Hard to check if reaching the target recipients due to anonymity. • Relies on good literacy and technology capability levels. • Data may be skewed to those with access to cell phones.

Method	When to use this method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Telephone surveys and interviews (including Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing)	Telephone surveys can be used for primary data collection across a large population. It typically requires many data collectors to make phone calls and conduct interviews. Data collection can range from structured (surveys) to semi-structured and unstructured interviews. It can be a replacement for face-to-face surveys or interviews, as it allows the interviewer to build rapport and have more in-depth discussions.	• Does not require a high level of literacy. • Higher amount of accuracy in who is participating than SMS surveys. • Most closely approximates in-person data collection.	• Relies on already having telephone numbers of the target group and permission to contact them. • Privacy considerations, i.e. risk for vulnerable populations where conversations could be overheard about sensitive topics. • Lower response rates as compared to in-person surveys and interviews. • Requires a narrower scope of data collection as people may disengage quickly. • Difficult to establish trust over the phone and discuss sensitive issues or provide personal information. • Data may be skewed to those with access to cell phones, and marginalised populations may be missed.
Mobile apps for two-way communication (Messenger, WhatsApp, Slack, WeChat, IMO, Skype, Line)	Mobile apps can work in a similar way to SMS/text message data collection. WhatsApp groups can be used to organise and provide support as well as collect data. The facilitator of a moderated chat group can participate in a moderated group with other facilitators and in this way, facilitators can learn how communities solve problems and support them.	• Responsive. • Can use group chat for a focus group or participant interviews. • Most apps are free to use. • Can use from computer to smartphone. • Some (e.g. WhatsApp) have good security encryption. • WhatsApp numbers remain constant through international borders and networks.	• Privacy considerations (who owns the platform and how they manage privacy) and need to consider how to obtain formal consent of participants to provide their information. • Requires good data signal. • Relies on good literacy and technology capability levels. • Data may be skewed to those with access to cell phones. • Participants may incur a cost for which they should be compensated.
Web surveys (e.g. Google Forms, Survey Monkey, Qualtrics, and Kobo Toolbox)	Web surveys can be a replacement for structured interviews or paper-based surveys. However, the scope of data collection may need to be reduced as people are less likely to spend a long time on web surveys compared to face-to-face interviews. This type of survey is appropriate for staff, key stakeholders, and individuals who have engaged extensively with an intervention, and less appropriate for individuals who have been less extensively engaged.	• Relatively low cost. • Can be conducted from multiple devices. • Can provide anonymity. • Can collect data at scale. • Simple data analysis may be built into the survey software (e.g. survey monkey).	• Data privacy may not be guaranteed, depending on the platform. • Requires a certain level of technological capability and overall literacy. • Anonymity of who is participating may not be guaranteed. • Data may be skewed to those with access to the necessary technology, with limited participation by marginalised groups. • Need to consider how to obtain formal consent of participants to provide their information. • Participants may incur a cost for which they should be compensated.

8 For details of different software that can be used both online and offline, refer to: Smith, 2023 and Lutheran World Relief, undated. Further resources for good practice are available from: Kondlyis & McKenzie, 2022; Kopper & Sautmann, 2020; and Jones et al, 2020.

Method	When to use this method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Videoconferencing (e.g. Zoom, Teams, GoogleMeet)	Videoconferencing is a potential option for: - Focus group discussions and interviews, when the participants are in different locations or social distancing is required. - Testing and validating findings as a replacement for workshops.	• High level of interactivity and participation. • Use of breakout groups for interaction and brainstorming. • Getting high-quality, rich data. • Availability for recording.	• Large videoconferences or workshops are often far less engaging than when they happen face-to-face. More individual or small group videoconferences may deliver better data and be more time-consuming. • Privacy considerations. • Requires good data signal (which incurs costs). • Relies on good technology capability levels. • Requires a good facilitator (or multiple facilitators) to keep engaging and allowing all participants a voice. • Data may be skewed to those with access to the necessary technology.
Use of online software for virtual whiteboards[9], typically in conjunction with video-conferencing or two-way communication software.	Virtual whiteboards can be a great way to do joint, participatory work remotely and try and approximate participatory workshops. They can be used to review theories of change, jointly review monitoring data or evaluation findings, interpret results, and develop recommendations.	• Interactive and participatory. • Getting abundant data.	• Privacy considerations. • Can be expensive to subscribe to platforms. • Requires good data signal (which incurs costs). • Relies on good technology capability levels. • Requires certain literacy levels. • Data may be skewed to those with access to the necessary technology. • Requires strong facilitation skills.
Media Content Analysis[10]	To understand context or monitor the use of evaluation findings or uptake of recommendations.	• Data is typically available in the public domain. • Straightforward to collect and analyse data.	• Generally, data is only available at the activity or output level, excluding outcomes. • May require a paid subscription to a service which can review an extensive range of media for particular search terms.
Social media for private groups (e.g. Private Facebook groups, Telegram/ WhatsApp)	Can provide a good forum for engaging with a targeted group. It can be an option which replaces focus groups, as participants can virtually. 'talk' amongst themselves and collectively develop ideas. In some countries, Facebook chatbots are used to assess community members. Teams work with social media influencers within target communities to host the "bots" on popular Facebook pages and within groups. The bots allow the team to conduct rapid surveys of members of the groups in local languages (GOARN RCCE, 2020).	• High level of interactivity and participation.	• Privacy considerations in accessing private groups- need to ensure that participants know what the information will be used for. • Requires good data signal (which incurs costs). • Relies on good technology capability levels. • Requires certain literacy levels. • Data may be skewed to those with access to the necessary technology or younger people who are bigger users of social media. • Need to consider how to obtain formal consent of participants to provide their information.

9 e.g. Lucidchart, Miro, Mural, Trello, Monday, Jamboard
10 Media content analysis is the systematic review and analysis of mass media - generally in the public domain - as text. The media reviewed can include interview transcripts, film narrative, TV programmes and newspaper and magazine content.

Method	When to use this method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Photovoice	Photovoice allows beneficiaries to document the changes a programme makes in their lives. They are provided with a camera or video camera and encouraged to take photos/videos to write their response to specified monitoring questions. It can be an alternative to in-depth interviewing or developing case studies.	• Empowers beneficiaries to tell their story.	• Requires technology to take and send photos and videos. • Difficult to determine if the location is accurate. • Need to consider child protection and privacy implications.
Satellite Imagery	Satellite imagery can be beneficial to gather visual data of hard to access locations. It can be particularly valuable in humanitarian disasters to understand where infrastructure is located, monitor people's movements, and understand geographical terrain. It can provide both contextual information and useful monitoring data. It can help capture some of the information you would normally collect during a site visit.	• GPS or geo-location data can be acquired. • Can pinpoint works for accountability measures. • May allow for fast, real-time data collection. • Could be used for geomapping and context monitoring. • Some satellite data is free or owned by partners who may be willing to share.	• Privacy considerations. • May be expensive if you need to pay to access the data. • May be difficult to access. • May be affected by adverse weather conditions. • Raw data requires visual interpretation and/or technical analysis to facilitate interpretation by persons with an in-depth understanding of the local context. Images do not provide information on the causes of captured events. • May need technical advice to know where to access satellite data. • Potential security risks for beneficiaries or those involved in the collection and transmission of images.
Drones	Drones can visually confirm the position and status of infrastructure or look at geographical terrain or people movements. They can also be used for environmental monitoring. You can also use cameras mounted on drones to provide authentic time images of sites. It can help capture some of the information you normally collect during a site visit.	• Can pinpoint works for accountability measures. • Allows visual look at sites which can't be physically visited in-person. • Can be helpful for context monitoring, such as population movements, displacement or resettlement monitoring.	• Privacy considerations. • May not be legally possible. • Invasive. • Expensive. • Can be limited by adverse weather or dense vegetation cover. • Can have limitations from a radius of operation. • May be dangerous in conflict areas - seen as a threat. • Doesn't allow assessment of the quality of infrastructure. • Requires appropriate skills to interpret photos and read in the context of the local environment.
Geo-mapping/ Geotagging (including photos or videos with geotagging)	Can provide visual images of areas, allowing tracking of infrastructure, geographical features of the land, and the movement of people. It can help capture some of the information you normally collect during a site visit.	• Can pinpoint locations of participants for accountability. • Provide visual confirmation of particular activities. • GPS data is available in any weather/climatic conditions; network access is free.	• Privacy considerations. • Potential security risks for beneficiaries or those involved in the collection and transmission of images. • Taking photos of some groups (e.g. women, children or ethnic minorities) may be inappropriate. • Requires appropriate skills to interpret photos and read in the context of the local environment. • Need to consider how to obtain formal consent of participants to provide their information.

Method	When to use this method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Big Data such as cell phone and banking data	Big Data can provide a way to monitor key indicators over a large population. It can be less resource heavy than surveying a population as it doesn't require engagement with beneficiaries. However, there will probably be a need to engage expertise to help with the data analysis.	• May be the best option where other options aren't possible. • Can provide real-time awareness of events and real-time feedback on a situation. • Can be less invasive - doesn't require engagement or time from respondents. • Can reduce costs and increase efficiencies.	• May be challenging to access this data from companies. • Privacy and security considerations. • Data quality may be compromised. • Data may not match M&E needs. • Data may be skewed to those with access to cell phones and formal banking systems. • May need to contact technical support to analyse the data. • Need to consider how to obtain formal consent of participants to provide their information.

8 Running virtual meetings and reporting

One of the key means of reporting virtual evaluation findings is in virtual meetings. It is therefore very important to master conducting virtual meetings, whether for meetings with evaluation commissioners, evaluation teams, users and beneficiaries, or workshops such as for developing theories of change, or reporting evaluation findings. Virtual meetings are typically done via an online videoconferencing platform and the use of online virtual whiteboards. The protocol outlined below could be used for meetings to plan evaluations and data collection, as well as for reporting findings of the evaluation.

8.1 Planning the meeting - steps to follow 1-2 weeks before the virtual session

1. Choose a **videoconferencing platform and whiteboard** that will suit the requirements of the meeting.

Top tip:

Learn how to use the key features of the platform that has been chosen to avoid any challenges on the day. Consider offering participants the opportunity to participate in an onboarding session, hosted a day or two or directly before the virtual session, to enable them to practice using the online platform and any tools that will be used during the session. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for evaluators – as well as participants - to struggle with certain platforms and tools.

- The **choice of platform** is critical. The three most common video conferencing platforms are Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet. A comparison conducted in June 2022 of these platforms can assist in determining choice (see Table 2 overleaf).

The next most important tool for online workshops is **whiteboards**, the four most common ones being MURAL, Miro, JamBoard and StormBoard. Whiteboards are online visual workspaces that allow teams to collaborate in real time. Online whiteboards can make meetings more efficient and creatively engage participants during a workshop. Key features of virtual whiteboards include (Conceptboard, 2023). Other tools you may want to consider include:

- **Digital sticky notes -** Allow sharing ideas during a brainstorming session or adding comments to a document or design. Depending on the group size, it is possible to allocate a person a different colour to track their input or use different colours to denote different input types.
- **Infinite canvas -** The space expands infinitely with your content. Therefore, you do not need to erase the brainstorming that has been done, but the team can move to another location on the board.
- **Content import -** This function allows for adding documents, images and videos to the whiteboard to make it visually appealing and support or reference any essential information.
- **Drawing tools -** To fully capture ideas and relevant data, tools in various sizes and colours, highlighters, lines, and many shapes will be beneficial.

2. **Identify and brief the facilitation team:** Ideally, a second facilitator should be present to provide support during the meeting. For example, by monitoring the chat and supporting participants having technological challenges, muting participants in case of disruptions, monitoring virtual hand raising, managing slide progression and taking notes.

3. **Prepare an essential troubleshooting guide for participants:** Detail key information about the platform being used, e.g. joining instructions, participant renaming, audio and video settings, etc., or share a guide that has already been developed. This will allow participants to familiarise themselves with the platform and feel more comfortable. If possible, arrange an onboarding session ideally a day or two before the virtual session or directly beforehand.

Table 2: Comparison of common online meeting platforms

Features on paid plans	Zoom	Microsoft Teams	Google Meet
Number of participants	1000 maximum payment plan	Up to 250 paid plan	250 maximum paid plan
HD video and voice	√	√	√
Screen sharing	By multiple people	Between other Teams users	Screen presenting
Number of meetings per month	Unlimited	√	√
Whiteboarding	Zoom whiteboard, integration possible with other whiteboard applications.	Microsoft whiteboard	Jamboard, integration possible with other whiteboard applications.
Waiting room	√	√	√
Chat and messaging (private and group)	√ both	√	√ group chat only
Meeting record option	√	√	√
Ability to join a meeting by telephone	√	√	√
Breakout rooms	√	√	√
Instant or scheduled meetings	√ both	√ both	√ both
Livestreaming	√	√	√
Collaborate on web version of Word, Excel, Powerpoint	x	√	On google-suite products
Live captioning	√	√	√
Reporting with insights into usage, meetings, participants and activity	√	√	Attendance tracking
Features of free version	40 minute meetings with up to 100 participants and unlimited one-to-one meetings.	No time limit on calls.	No time limit on calls with 100 participants, unlimited one-to-one meetings. No recording option available.
Disadvantages	Concerns regarding privacy risks and hacking vulnerabilities as well as Zoombombing (where uninvited attendees break into and disrupt meetings).	Micosoft-centric.	Google-focused, cannot record meetings unless enterprise licence.

4. **Understand the participants:** Consider sending a pre-meeting questionnaire to participants, which will enable you to understand interests and prior knowledge and introduce the meeting at an adequate level of detail. Consider the devices participants will use to join the meeting, the need for translators or interpreters, visual and hearing aids and screen sharing.

5. **Prepare the agenda and slides:** Allow for delays in joining the meeting and introductions. If the meeting is longer than 1 hour, incorporate breaks every 60 minutes to ensure that participants remain engaged. It is vital to include more breaks and interactions than if the workshop were in-person, because remote working makes it easier for participants to be distracted. Therefore, it is key to engage participants regularly. Prepare a slide deck which contains images, videos and stories to keep participants engaged.

Top tip:

Prepare whiteboards and sticky notes in advance – with spaces for the agenda, activities and discussion sessions. Links for the breakout rooms can be created in advance and ready to be used during the workshop.

6. **Send a calendar invite to participants** ahead of time; which should include:
   - Objectives of the meeting and the primary expected output
   - Meeting agenda
   - Web link and passcodes to connect to the meeting
   - Videoconferencing troubleshooting guide

7. **Send a reminder to participants** 24 hours before the meeting starts requesting participants check their technology and complete any pre-session assignments (VIVAYIC, undated).

8.2 What to do if you have poor internet connectivity?

The following tips apply to those struggling with internet connectivity (Imperial College London, undated):

- Where possible, try to use a wired ethernet connection instead of wireless internet; this will help attain the best possible internet speed.
- If using a wireless router, stay as close as possible because the farther away you are, the slower the internet speed. Electric appliances and walls interfere with the internet signals; therefore, try to ensure your computer is in line with the position of the wireless router.
- Request participants with poor connectivity to have as few devices as possible connected to their wireless router[11]. Even if a device is not in use, it should be disconnected, because some devices use internet bandwidth even on standby or turned off.
- Minimize the use of videos and large files that require large amounts of data and may affect connectivity.
- Reboot your router - periodically unplug it from the mains, wait 30 seconds, and plug it in again.
- As a last resort, turn off video or request participants to use video only when speaking. Having video on aids better communication and productivity, but increases the bandwidth required.
- Consider organising your workshop at 'off' times, meaning not on the hour or half-hour. Schedule a meeting for 8:15 AM instead of 8 AM or 9:45 instead of 9:30. Avoiding peak times helps minimise internet congestion which can impact on the quality of an online workshop.
- It can be challenging to share large data files at certain times of the day due to slow internet connections. It may be beneficial to conduct an internet speed test at different times of day to understand when the speed is better. Note that there is an asymmetry in the download and upload speed, i.e. Your upload speed is generally much slower than your download speed.
- You can use a website to test internet speed, e.g. try www.speedtest.net and click on 'Go'. If you are working in the same time zone, it has generally been found that internet connectivity is best when everyone is asleep or early in the morning.

8.3 Running the virtual session

1. Before the meeting, log in and **test the microphone, speaker, video and screen sharing.** If required, set up an appropriate branded background, blur the background, or select a simple background with no distraction. Test translation channels to ensure they are operational.

11 This is only applicable if mobile data is not being used.

Top tip:

Close down other documents you have open when you are about to share your screen to prevent personal or private information from being accidentally made public.

2. **Create an attendance list and mark when a person speaks.** This way, you can track participants who have not been as engaged. Encourage the use of private messaging[12] and the chat function for quieter participants, as well as polling functionalities either within or outside the platform (i.e. Zoom polls, Mentimeter etc.).

3. **Have an interesting start to the meeting.** Play music while participants join or share a meaningful video or image to get participants to reflect.

4. **Introductions.** Ask participants to introduce themselves by sharing their name, organisation, and role in the evaluation/project and emptying their 'cup'. 'Emptying your cup' gives participants "permission" to share what might be top of mind and rid themselves of pent-up emotions and energies, so that they can create space to take in all that will be offered in the meeting.

5. Consider **conducting an ice breaker.** This can help create comfort and build rapport for a successful meeting and keep the attendees engaged when the conversation switches to business. It can be used to introduce and build familiarity with online tools to be used during the meeting.

6. **Outline the protocol for the meeting and manage expectations.**

This includes:

- Clarifying the purpose of the meeting,
- Outlining the agenda, and
- Confirming the timing of the meeting.
- Setting out the procedure for asking questions and any participant requirements.
- If the meeting is being recorded, flag this and explain why and how the data collected will be used.

FACILITATOR GUIDANCE

Ensure that you have a facilitators guide, as per a face to face workshop

1. Smile
2. Dress as for an in-person meeting.
3. Speak more slowly than when in person.
4. Mute notifications for all other applications.
5. Extend pauses after everything you say to give people plenty of time to weigh in.
6. Make "eye contact" by looking into your camera.
7. Frequently ask if anyone has any questions or additional thoughts.
8. Avoid looking at yourself on the screen.
9. Acknowledge the speaker's contributions with a silent nod or follow up with 'that is really interesting, can you tell me more..'
10. Call on attendees who haven't had a chance to say anything.
11. Print the agenda and meeting plan and have it in front of you.

If connectivity is good consider requesting participants to keep their cameras and microphones on. This will mean they are accountable for being present and increase interaction.

Top tip:

There are various applications designed to reduce background noise, which can be very useful when joining a virtual meeting from a noisy environment. Many are free, and comparisons of their key features can be found online, for example at: https://helpdeskgeek.com/free-tools-review/7-best-noise-cancellation-software-for-windows-and-mac/ (retrieved 12/08/2023).

7. Different options for **online whiteboards** were discussed above. If an online whiteboard is not used there are other options for capturing notes including: in a collaborative document (e.g. in googledocs, or googleslides), via the chat function, or an offline document. It is important to provide several options that will not limit people with connectivity/technological challenges from participating.
8. **Engage, engage, engage:** Participants' nonverbal behaviours can be observed. Facial expressions and body posture provide emotional immediacy that can be followed up on. There is also the possibility in online meetings that participants might attempt to multitask or hold side conversations, moving their full attention away without the knowledge of the rest of the group or the facilitators (Galloway, 2011). Constant interaction is essential and can prevent this during virtual workshops.
9. **Facilitate decision-making:** Subject to the need, use meetings and online whiteboard or brainstorming tools to share ideas and key contextual factors for consideration in decision making. Create and present options. If you're working to generate solutions, use any feedback gathering tools listed (e.g., chat feature, whiteboard tools, etc.). Making the decision, after all options are shared/discussed/created, use any of the tools to gather participant input (e.g. Zoom polls, Mentimeter etc.).
10. At the end of the meeting, gather final thoughts and summarise key points and next steps. Gather feedback from participants on: What went well? What could be done better for future sessions? What challenged you? What are you concerned about? This allows participants to express themselves rather than abruptly disconnecting from their engagement.

8.4 After the virtual session

1. **Send a follow-up email** shortly afterwards with a summary of the meeting, resources (if applicable), follow-up actions and responsible persons. Thank participants for their contributions—welcome feedback to improve future sessions, and if appropriate, you can send out a survey.
2. **Capture your first impressions quickly,** including observations and general feelings about what stood out and was different. Anything circumstantial, like what made people uncomfortable, may also be worth capturing. These will be important to consider and review when reporting as they may highlight essential issues that 'normalise' over the evaluation.

9 Challenges of conducting evaluations virtually

This section discusses challenges commonly encountered when conducting evaluations virtually. These relate to the context, the evaluand, as well as stages of the evaluation cycle.

1. **Inclusion:** Technology is utilised to undertake virtual evaluation and most technology solutions require, at a minimum, access to basic technological equipment or devices, electricity and connectivity. It is important to be aware of these challenges, and consider them from the outset - and critically when sampling – to ensure that the voices of hard to reach people and groups are not excluded. Challenges include:
    - **Technology:** 'Elite capture' is a problem that occurs with digital-only approaches. Digital channels tend to engage people who are younger, male, of higher income and educational attainment, and who are more frequent social media users (Raftree, 2021). Women, children and people with disabilities represent a segment of the population that tends to be challenging to reach, as well as in rural areas. Convenience sampling is commonly used, when those we would ideally want to speak to cannot be reached, which introduces selection bias (Vaessen & Raimondo, 2020).
    - **Electricity:** Lack of electricity or loadshedding may prevent those with mobile devices from charging cell phones or other mobile devices, thereby limiting access.
    - **Connectivity:** Airtime remains an economic barrier to access, further exacerbated by people not understanding different payment plans that can provide value for money. There is anecdotal evidence that older users of cell phone devices struggle to understand payment plans, especially those which are cost-effective, and poor cell phone connectivity is experienced in rural areas and townships as opposed to urban areas, likely due to poor telecommunications infrastructure and becomes worse during load shedding.
2. **Human dynamics and understanding the context:** When data collection takes place virtually it is more challenging to build rapport with respondents (as indicated in box 2 below). Several risks can affect the quality of the data and its interpretation, resulting in missed opportunities for inquiry. This includes the risk of overlooking critical contextual changes, body language and queues that may be intended or unintended. It is difficult to judge power dynamics, relationships and reactions when you are not physically present. Furthermore, what may seem unimportant to respondents may be very pertinent to an evaluation, e.g. for a cash voucher programme, if through observation and evaluator finds there is a specific demographic or gender imbalance of those receiving the vouchers, this can be further investigated, whereas this may be something respondents do not consider important

or necessary. When information about outcomes and impact is collected remotely, it is easy to attain a biased picture of the results and their drivers. It is important to gather, review and reflect on relevant background/ contextual information before undertaking virtual data collection, and where possible involve people – including participants – in sense making, to ensure that important aspects are not misunderstood or overlooked.

Box 2: Be careful with virtual interviews

Interviews can feel quicker because the interaction in the preamble leading to the interview was not as personal, and importantly, the closing of the interview can feel more sudden. Building rapport and intimacy without human presence may be more difficult. When the 'leave the meeting' button is clicked the interaction abruptly closes, and there isn't that taken-for-granted space of physically leaving a one-to-one interview, with the usual farewells, the checking that the participants are well, and the researcher reflecting on the experience on return to their usual workplace. Instead there is a swift sense of separation and finality.

3. **Managing expectations:** It is essential to be clear about the purpose of data collection in order not to mislead affected people. Respondents may assume that evaluators intend to provide aid or similar assistance. In the case of the former, they are less likely to provide their honest opinion in the hope of saying what is needed/expected to qualify for assistance. Managing expectations when undertaking an evaluation is a challenge when undertaking all types of evaluations, and this is exacerbated when evaluations are undertaken virtually during times of crisis.
4. **Relationship with the evaluand team and perception of evaluation:** During a crisis, programme managers and implementers may refuse to partake in or support data collection efforts if they don't view them as being a priority. Ensuring transparency and building a relationship of trust, which supports buy in to the evaluation process, by implementing partners and beneficiaries are critical determinants of success.
5. **Struggle to use online platforms:** Participants who are less digitally literate will find it difficult to engage with common online platforms typically used to collect data and share evaluation findings virtually. Tips to support people to participate in online meetings were shared above.
6. **New data collection and analysis methods:** Virtual evaluation can tap into new and alternative methods and sources such as drones and geographic information systems (GIS), as well as tried and tested data collection methods, and new technologies such as machine learning and artificial intelligence present possibilities for new types of data analysis. These present challenges – relating to the evaluator's familiarity with them, skill to undertake them and experience – as well as opportunities. Data collection and analysis methods should be selected carefully, with the evaluation aims, questions and context in mind, and training and advice sought from individuals with experience utilising them where necessary.

10 Ethical and data governance issues

10.1 Ethical considerations in conducting evaluations virtually

Whilst ethical conduct and protecting the safety and security of evaluation participants and their data is critical when undertaking all types of evaluation research, some aspects require additional consideration when undertaking virtual evaluation, for instance:

- Ensuring that participants understand the purpose of the study and freely consent to participate can be more difficult when you are not able to meet face-to-face and build rapport.
- Ensuring confidentiality – when you are not physically in the same place as participants and thus able to ensure privacy – can be more challenging.
- Further, there are additional considerations relating to securing and protecting data when it needs to be digitally transmitted.

The DPME Ethical Guideline for Evaluation (DPME, 2022a) is an important resource – providing a framework for decision making on ethical issues relevant to evaluation practice – which should be consulted by evaluators and evaluation commissioners prior to undertaking an evaluation.

10.2 Data governance

Similar to ethics, data governance – which refers to a set of rules and norms about why and how data is captured and used and who is responsible for the process – is important when engaging in all types of evaluation. Data governance extends beyond data management, data privacy, and data protection, to include end-to-end policies, strategies, standards, rights, and accountabilities for data (CLEAR-

AA & Merltech, 2021). Annex 2 contains a checklist for ensuring responsible data governance at all stages of a virtual evaluation, adapted from the 'Responsible Data Governance for Monitoring and Evaluation in the African Context- Part 2' report (CLEAR-AA & Merltech, 2021). For additional guidance, please refer to this resource. The main headings are:

1. Design and plan your data-related process
2. Collect or acquire data
3. Transmit and/or store data.
4. Clean and analyse the data.
5. Share and/or open the data.
6. Visualise and/or communicate data or use data for decision making.
7. Retain, maintain, and/or destroy your data after the project or initiative is complete.

The DPME's Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Data Strategy 2022-2024 (DPME, 2022b) also provides important guidance pertaining to access, use and the protection of data and should be consulted when undertaking public sector evaluations. The Strategy incorporates a Data Governance Framework which covers: policy and standards; data quality; privacy/compliance/security; data architecture/integration; data warehouses and business intelligence; and management support.

10.3 POPIA

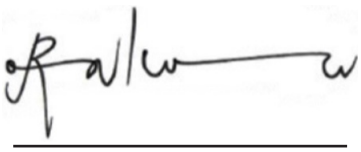
The right to privacy is enshrined in the South African Constitution, and the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), No. 4 of 2013, was introduced to protect this right and came into effect on 1 July 2020. POPIA puts in place a regulatory framework to protect the rights of data subjects which is relevant to ALL types of data processing including virtual.

Key considerations of POPIA when undertaking virtual evaluations include (UKZN & USAF, undated):

- **De-identification where viable –** Identifiable information should only be collected where necessary and de-identified as soon as possible, where viable. Identities could be masked by using pseudonyms.
- **Collect as little data as possible –** All personal information that is collected should be relevant to the evaluation. Questions to ask include: Why is personal information being collected? How will personal information be used? Can the same results be achieved without collecting personal information?

- **Be transparent –** Participants must be informed about the purpose of the study and how their personal information will be used. Team members should be aware of privacy risks for participants and understand their responsibilities. Data management – and steps to be taken to mitigate risks – should be documented in a data management plan.
- **Keep information safe –** Steps should be taken to safe guard data against unauthorised access, use, destruction and loss by, e.g. ensuring that files are stored and shared securely; sensitive data is encrypted; back-ups are secured; and restricting access to identifiable information.

Other legislative frameworks may also be relevant when undertaking evaluations outside of South Africa, or for international organisations.



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Director-General
Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
Date: 24 / 04 / 2024

Annexes

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Annex 2: Data governance checklist

The following checklist has been adapted from CLEAR-AA & Merltech, 2021[13].

1. Design and plan your data-related process
   - Develop a Terms of Reference, and identify partners.
   - List the various data-related processes needed.
   - Outline the rules and roles for stakeholder participation in design and planning.
   - Plan and budget for how data will be managed from beginning to end and how long it will be retained. NB National Data Privacy Legislation may stipulate how long personal or sensitive data can or should be held for.

13 Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results – Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) and MERL Tech (2021) "Responsible Data Governance for Monitoring and Evaluation in the African Context. Part 1: Overview of Data Governance and Part 2: Guidance for Responsible Data Governance in Monitoring and Evaluation." Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management | University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. Retrieved from: https://merltech.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Responsible-Data-Governance-for-ME_part-1.pdf 11/08/2023

- Determine what laws govern and/or provide a lawful basis for data collection.
- Decide how you will obtain consent.
- Obtain ethical clearance (if needed).
- Put data sharing and/or data processing agreements in place to protect your organisation and the people whose data is being collected (i.e. data subjects).
- Conduct a risk-benefit assessment and a risk mitigation plan to check whether your plan will keep data and the people who provide it safe and secure.

2. Collect or acquire data
   - Be aware of the potential risks of collecting or acquiring data from or about vulnerable people (prepare a risk mitigation plan).
   - Be sure you have a reason for collecting every data point you plan to capture – do not collect personal or sensitive information unless you have a valid and justified purpose.
   - Define your data collection tools and procedures.
   - Document your consent process.
   - Provide a clear explanation to data subjects as to why you are collecting data, what you will do with it, whom you will share it with, and how long you will keep it.
   - Ensure that you have mechanisms for complaints to be raised and ways to address requests from data subjects to correct their data, remove their data, or withdraw consent for data processing.

3. Transmit and/or store data.
   - Securely transfer the data to where it will be analysed or stored.
   - Store the data safely on a secure laptop, organisation server or database, or in the cloud; multiple secure backups are recommended.
   - Set access limits and robust security for your systems so that the data is kept safe from unauthorised access, changes, downloading, deletion, or other data breaches or hacks.
   - Ensure a clear and transparent process for storing consent documentation.

4. Clean and analyse the data.
   - Clean the data and conduct data quality assurance
   - Tag or describe the data correctly so that it can be located in the system if and when necessary.
   - De-identify, anonymise, or aggregate the data to protect individuals from being identified.
   - Analyse the data.
   - Document the processes that have been performed on the data.

5. Share and/or open the data.
   - Before sharing data, review your consent documentation (see Step 2). Do not share personal or sensitive data without consent from the data subjects.
   - Use safe sharing practices and limit who can access the data.
   - Ensure that data sharing or processing agreements with clear accountability protocols are in place.

6. Visualise and/or communicate data or use data for decision making.
   - Decide how best to communicate insights to the specific target audiences.
   - Disseminate and communicate the information and knowledge gained to enable better decisions, services and learning.
   - Ensure that data is adequately anonymised or de-identified to avoid harm.

7. Retain, maintain, and/or destroy your data after the project or initiative is complete.
   - Review how long data will be held at the design stage (see Step 1) and plan accordingly.
   - If possible, aggregate or anonymise data so that it is less likely to be linked to an individual.
   - Delete data as soon as possible to reduce liability.
   - Ensure that data and devices are closed when a programme is complete.

Annex 3: Useful additional resources for virtual evaluation

There are 70 South Africa-specific datasets on data.world (https://data.world/datasets/south-africa, accessed 08/10/2023) which holds open-sourced, administrative and geospatial data.

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