ADAPTING THE RAPID EDUCATION AND RISK ANALYSIS IN COLOMBIA

A Companion Brief

Students from the Diego Luis Cordoba School in the municipality of Acandi, Department of Choco in Colombia. Photo courtesy: Veo Luego Aprendo/Daniel Agudelo-Navarro.

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SUMMARY

USAID/Colombia commissioned a Rapid Education Risk Analysis (RERA) of the situation of urban and peri-urban school communities receiving migrant Venezuelans. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the RERA team pivoted from an in-person assessment to a remote assessment. The RERA team collaborated intensively with local education secretariats and school principals by telephone to identify over 600 respondents in 11 different sites and obtain their contact information. Ultimately, the survey recorded 457 successful responses, and qualitative interviews were conducted with 201 of those respondents. The blog shares some key conclusions on the assessment and lessons learned from its remote implementation.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 and related social restriction policies have created unprecedented challenges for humanitarian and development organizations. These challenges are even more problematic when they appear in contexts with existing hazards and threats. Such is the case in Colombia, where COVID-19 emerged in a dynamic mix of 1.6 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees, a legacy of long-standing armed conflict and massive internal displacement, and vulnerabilities to multiple natural hazards. Planning an education sector response in this complex environment called for organizational adaptability and agility—starting with efforts to understand the rapidly evolving context.

The Government of Colombia needed data to implement flexible and effective models of education for both migrants and the communities that host them, to strengthen already stressed education systems, and tailor support for education access, retention, and school community resilience. In March, with funding from USAID/Colombia, DevTech began planning to conduct a [Rapid Education and Risk Analysis](#) (RERA) of the situation of urban and peri-urban school communities receiving migrant Venezuelans, as well as the needs of the education system working to accommodate them while continuing to serve all school-aged children. A RERA is a qualitative situation analysis tool that examines the education sector and the school community as a dynamic system of multiple contextual risks and assets and gives a snapshot of the resilience of selected school communities.

Initial RERA planning assumed in-person primary data collection. However, as COVID-19 infection rates rose and social restriction measures were instituted in both the US and Colombia, DevTech quickly adapted its approach to conduct the RERA remotely. The RERA team would operate virtually from their home locations in Bogotá, New York, Washington, D.C., and Massachusetts while under lockdown. Primary data collection for the RERA involved a quantitative survey followed by qualitative semi-structured expert interviews of survey respondents—all of which would now be carried out by calling the cell phones of respondents. The RERA team collaborated intensively with eleven education secretariats and school principals by telephone to identify and gather phone numbers of over 600 respondents. In two weeks, the RERA research team surveyed 457 people (out of 600) and interviewed 201 people (out of 457). In each school community, the RERA team attempted to speak to the school director, teachers, students, their parents, and community members.

SELECTED CONCLUSIONS FROM THE RERA

The sale of drugs constitutes the most critical social risk faced by school communities and signals wider organized criminal activity. There is a generalized and normalized sale and consumption of drugs in school communities, and respondents in nearly all secretariats identified groups with different levels of organization that can be considered forms of gangs involved in micro-trafficking drugs.

Across all sites in the sample, most respondents cited positive relations between Venezuelan migrants and Colombians—but a significant minority reported tension and violence as well. Respondents reported how Venezuelan migrants and Colombian communities often coexisted peacefully and even pointed to a sense of solidarity—but many also cited some form of discrimination and violence against Venezuelans.

All schools in the sample have made impressive efforts to adapt to remote learning because of COVID-19—and teachers are playing a central role. Teachers were often described as heroes, as they adapted teaching methodologies and accommodated student needs to keep children engaged, often by their own initiative.

Remote learning has led to increased involvement of many families in education, but it is also accentuating inequalities in education access. Respondents described how parents have become more involved in helping their children with remote learning, but many families lack the technological resources for remote learning.

School community resilience to the COVID-19 crisis critically needs government action. Regional and national governments need to address underlying vulnerabilities and social risks that hamper the resilience of school communities to protect themselves from gang and organized criminal group violence, lack of access to water and sanitation, and the spread of COVID-19.

Overall, the Covid-19 crisis has enhanced school community cohesion and collaboration, but the risk of tension is real. Communities have come together through a sense of humanitarian solidarity, including Colombians and Venezuelans, but already struggling household livelihoods have suffered, exacerbating inequalities, and potentially increasing inter-group grievance.

Schools in the sample are not sufficiently prepared for a new emergency—particularly one occurring during the COVID-19 crisis. The safety of school buildings was questioned across the sample, existing school preparedness plans are outdated due to COVID-19, and simulations and evacuation drills appear to be implemented infrequently and inconsistently.

KEY LESSONS IN CARRYING OUT A REMOTE RERA

1. **Early and clear explanations of adaptation options help agile decision-making.**

   - DevTech drafted a concept note in March on how to adapt the RERA to remote management, with optional scenarios and budgetary implications, to inform a quick decision by USAID/Colombia and the Ministry of Education.

2. **Intensive collaboration with local education authorities and principals is even more crucial when working remotely.**

   - After formal introductions from the Ministry of Education, the RERA team iteratively communicated by email and telephone with local education secretariat officials to explain the RERA's remote process, discuss sample requirements and school selection, as well as respondent types, contact information, and connectivity requirements. This took more time given the crisis that secretariats and schools were managing. Getting through by phone was understandably challenging, and in one case, data privacy restrictions required additional discussions.

   - Principals in several school communities connected all respondents personally to explain the RERA and encourage them to participate.

3. **Various technologies are available and effective to support remote fieldwork.**

   - The RERA Team used KoboToolbox for the survey, and a mixture of Skype (both Skype-to-Skype and Skype-to-telephone) for interviews.

   - Documents were developed, shared, and discussed live using Google Drive and Google Documents.

   - Although the RERA Team did not conduct focus groups, platforms exist to conduct focus group discussions—which requires respondent access to technology and data, appropriate planning, and team training.

4. **Contracting a local call center can increase call efficiency.**

   - The RERA Team contracted a local data collection firm's own call center to administer the survey by telephone and reach respondents without access to data or the internet. The call center scheduled and conducted survey interviews, recorded informed consent, and scheduled all follow-up and qualitative interviews. The call center capability also optimized a culturally sensitive approach—local specialists were adept at reaching intended respondents in often busy households, speaking in local jargon, explaining the process in an understandable way, and establishing trust.

5. **In the future, we would conduct the survey and follow-up interview on the same call to increase the response rate.** Response rates for the RERA survey were strong but dropped off for the follow-up interview calls to the same respondents just a week later.

6. **Remote training can be effective- with sufficient time.**

   - Asynchronous and synchronous training approaches should be combined for effective training. For example, allow participants time to study materials off-line and then use platforms—such as live written or verbal question-and-answer sessions—strategically and efficiently. Plenary, synchronous sessions are important for specific topics which the entire team must discuss, such as ethics.

   - Running simulations to assess data collectors and test the protocols themselves are a necessity, especially for open-ended interviews, but sufficient time is needed for corrections and re-runs. The RERA Team could have benefitted from more time (one to two days) to adequately test survey and interview questions before the launch.

   - If a data collection firm is hired, maximizing the firm's internal quality control and management systems to discuss training content, prioritize questions, and consider running internal question-and-answer sessions can winnow and prioritize the list of questions for plenary.

7. **Requiring respondents to have a cell phone (or internet connectivity) to respond to a survey can bias the sample against the most vulnerable or marginalized.**

   - Requiring respondents to have a cell phone (or internet connectivity) can bias data collection away from the most vulnerable respondents in the sample. Tackling a lack of access to technology is a challenging and complex issue beyond the scope of an assessment, especially a rapid one. Some partners doing face-to-face surveys have issued phones and solar charges to respondents, but this approach for remote, rapid assessments may not be feasible. Local phone sharing strategies have potential, but these are also complicated by COVID-19 reality. A common approach is to find ways to supplement the data to infer the situation of vulnerable populations.

8. **Remote management may reap less insights.**

   - Conducting conversations on sensitive issues by telephone can affect the level of confidence in the respondent. On the one hand, speaking remotely might increase a respondent's trust and candor. However, in contexts where child recruitment and other predatory behaviors are common, speaking on the telephone can reduce trust.

   - Typically, doing in-person school visits for a RERA offer opportunities for the team to observe the school environment and gain additional insights from being present. This dimension is lost in a remotely managed RERA.

9. **Including children in remote data collection in an area of conflict and crisis has unique challenges.**

- In one area prone to child recruitment into armed groups, a secretariat required additional assurances of data protection, such as a signed agreement to license data use, before it would share student contact information.

- In interviews, there were instances where parents accompanied their children on the telephone and directed them what to say. Interviewers can explain to parents the need to let their children speak freely, but this must also be carefully observed to ensure quality control of the data.

10. **Working under COVID-19 social restrictions affects everyone—including the RERA Team.**

- RERA is designed to be a rapid exercise, thus it is important to recognize the pressures and unique stresses that affect not only respondents and partners, but RERA Team members themselves.

- Understanding, flexibility, and creativity all play important roles in managing for quality and results.

CONCLUSION

Overall, we found the RERA Toolkit to be readily adaptable to a fully remote process. Though the RERA Toolkit was not piloted in a fully remote scenario, the Colombia RERA demonstrates that it is possible. The RERA process involves two important moments of consultation with stakeholders—a briefing before data collection starts, and a consultation on preliminary results as data collection closes. These consultations were held using different on-line platforms and remain vital to the legitimacy of the RERA process and to the quality of the RERA conclusions and recommendations.