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# Implementing MEL during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Tools, Ideas & Reflections

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# Introductions



**Yvonne Cao**  
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Research and Evaluation  
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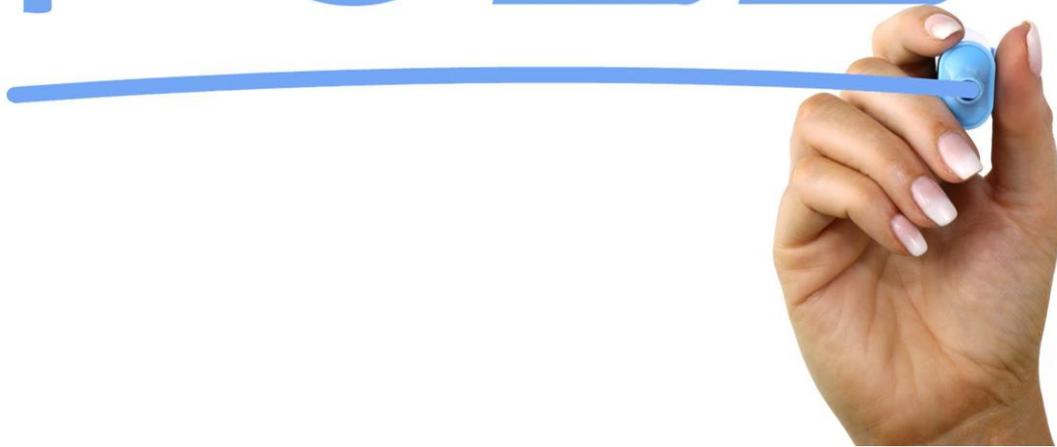
**Brian Dooley**  
Senior Technical Officer  
Research and Evaluation  
FHI 360

# Outline for Today's Webinar

- 1. Guiding Questions for Adapting MEL Plans**
- 2. Technology Options for Data Collection**
- 3. Best Practices for Remote Data Collection**

**But before we start, let's take a group photo!**

POLL



# **General Guiding Questions for Adapting Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Plans**

## Basics of a MEL Plan

- Describes the intervention or activity Theory of Change (TOC)
- Defines how the intervention or activity will be monitored and evaluated
- Includes monitoring indicators, their targets and definitions
- Describes data collection processes
- May include a learning agenda, with planned evaluations

# General Guiding Principles

**1**

**Minimize the risk of transmission**

**2**

**Communicate with technical and operational teams**

**3**

**Communicate with funders and other key stakeholders**

# Modifying our MEL plans: guiding questions

## 1 What indicators are impacted?

Issue	Considerations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Targets and Definitions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Modify indicator definitions so that new activities can count towards the indicator</li><li>• Modify targets</li><li>• Conduct scenario planning</li></ul>

# What is Scenario Planning?

- Planning for uncertainty
- Contingency planning
- How to do it?
  - Define the scenario question (e.g. different sets of targets?)
  - Identify drivers of change (e.g. timing of lockdown measures)
  - Develop scenarios
  - Implement scenario based on driver of change

# Modifying our MEL plans: guiding questions

## 1 What indicators are impacted?

Issue	Considerations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Targets and Definitions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Modify indicator definitions so that new activities can count towards the indicator</li><li>• Modify targets /scenario planning</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Data collection<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mode of data collection</li><li>• Timing of data collection</li><li>• Sample</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Switch from in-person to remote data collection (embedding into online platforms)</li><li>• Delay data collection activities</li><li>• Reconsider the sample design<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➔ what does it mean for interpretation and comparability of your data over time?</li></ul></li></ul>

# Modifying our MEL plans: guiding questions

## 1 What indicators are impacted?

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• New indicators</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• New indicators to capture outputs and outcomes of new activities</li><li>• Sentinel/contextual indicators for context monitoring to capture changing environment</li></ul>

## Examples of new indicators

- To capture COVID-19 related activities:
  - Number of PPE kits distributed
  - % of target population that adopts key behaviors related to COVID prevention
- Contextual indicators (also called sentinel indicators): what contextual factors would affect the implementation of your activity?
  - Number of new daily COVID cases / transmission rate
  - Re-opening dates (e.g. schools)

# Modifying our MEL plans: guiding questions

2

## What evaluation activities or research activities are impacted?

### Questions

- What is the “new” intervention, and will it lead to the same outcomes using the same logic model?

### Considerations

- Reviewing the Theory of Change to map out any changes in outputs/outcomes and ensure that research/evaluation questions are still relevant
- Delaying follow-on surveys to allow sufficient time to elapse to measure changes in outcomes

# Modifying our MEL plans: guiding questions

2

## What evaluation activities or research activities are impacted?

### Questions

- What is the “new” intervention, and will it lead to the same outcomes using the same logic model?
- If findings show no effect, is it because of the quality of the intervention vs. because of external circumstances due to the pandemic?

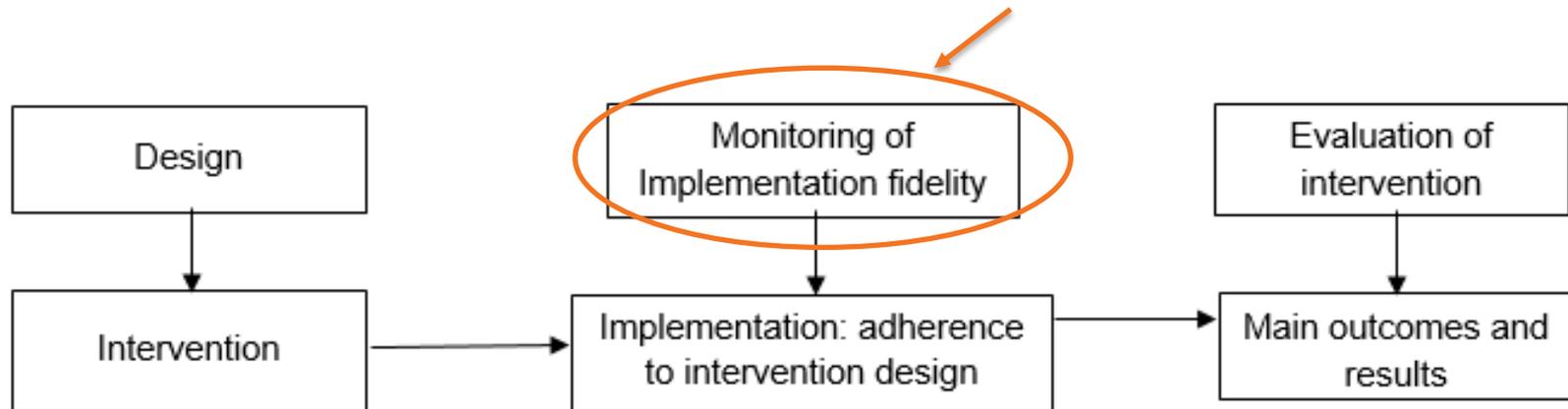
### Considerations

- Reviewing the Theory of Change to map out any changes in outputs/outcomes and ensure that research/evaluation questions are still relevant
- Delaying following-on surveys to allow sufficient time to elapse to measure changes in outcomes
- Measuring fidelity of implementation and intermediate outcomes to show whether intervention had an impact along the theory of change
- Identifying other unintended (negative or positive) consequences

# Measuring fidelity of implementation

- “The degree to which an intervention or program is delivered as intended” (Carroll et al, 2007)

Focus on measuring this if you weren't already



# Modifying our MEL plans: guiding questions

2

## What evaluation activities or research activities are impacted?

### Questions

- How are data collection activities impacted?

### Considerations

- Adjustments for qualitative data collection and to survey instruments (IRB)
- More emphasis on desk research (e.g. contextual assessments such as GESI analyses, RERAs etc)
- Use of informal platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook for collecting beneficiary feedback

# Modifying our MEL plans: guiding questions

## 3 What can we learn from this pandemic?

Modify or  
develop a  
learning  
agenda

### Illustrative learning questions:

- How are projects adapting in response to COVID-19? What projects are more successful in adapting than others and why?
- How are project modifications affecting different sub-populations differently? How does access to mobile technology affect different regions and subgroups?
- Are there circumstances and project activities we can take advantage of to set up experiments? For instance, if the project is now modified to reach beneficiaries in a phased approach, can we take advantage of it to conduct a rapid feedback impact evaluation?

## Modifying our MEL plans: guiding questions

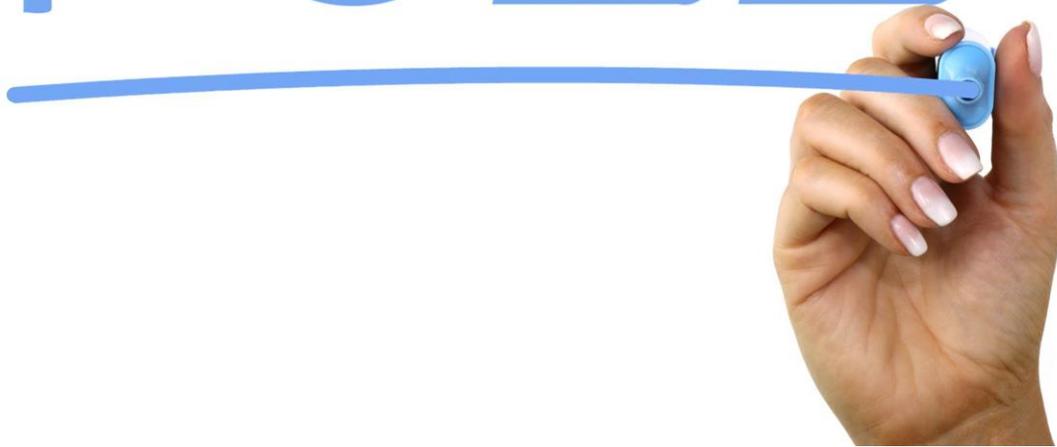
### 3 What can we learn from this pandemic?

Consider adding questions to existing survey instruments to better understand impact of COVID-19 on beneficiaries and use this information to inform project design

# Q&A

# Technology Options for Data Collection

POLL



# Options for data collection

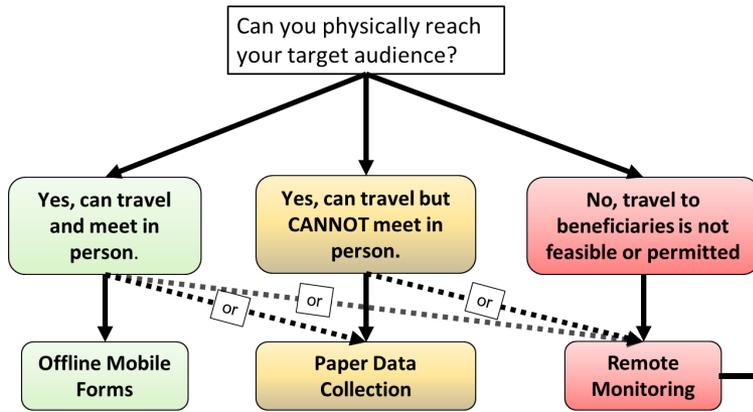
- In person:
  1. Offline Mobile Forms
  2. Paper Data Collection
- Remote by text:
  3. Online Survey
  4. SMS Survey
- Remote by voice:
  5. Phone calls
  6. IVR (Interactive Voice Response)

# How to choose the right technology

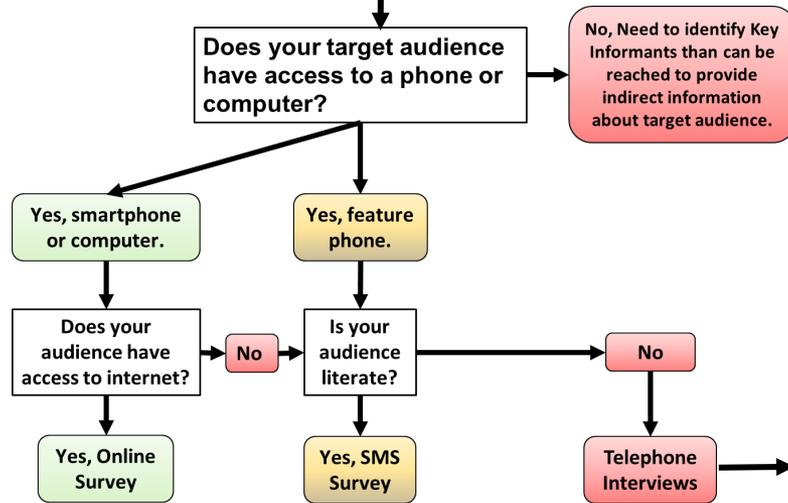
1. Can you physically reach your target audience?
2. Does your target audience have access to a phone or computer?
3. Is your audience literate?

# Technology Decision Tree

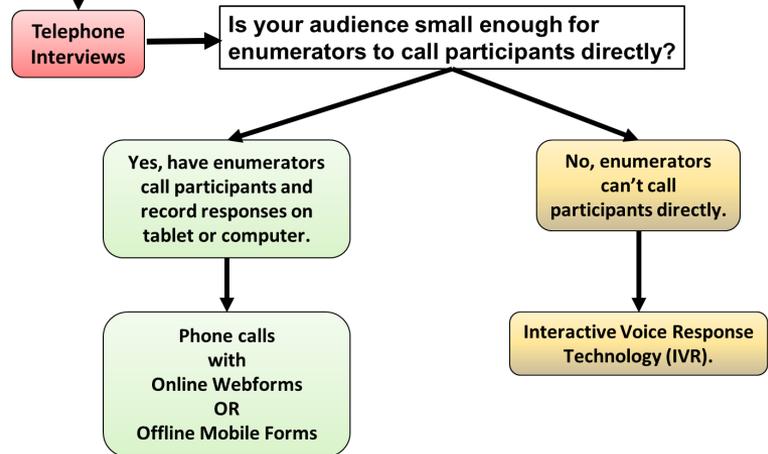
In Person



Remote by text



Remote by phone



# Accessibility

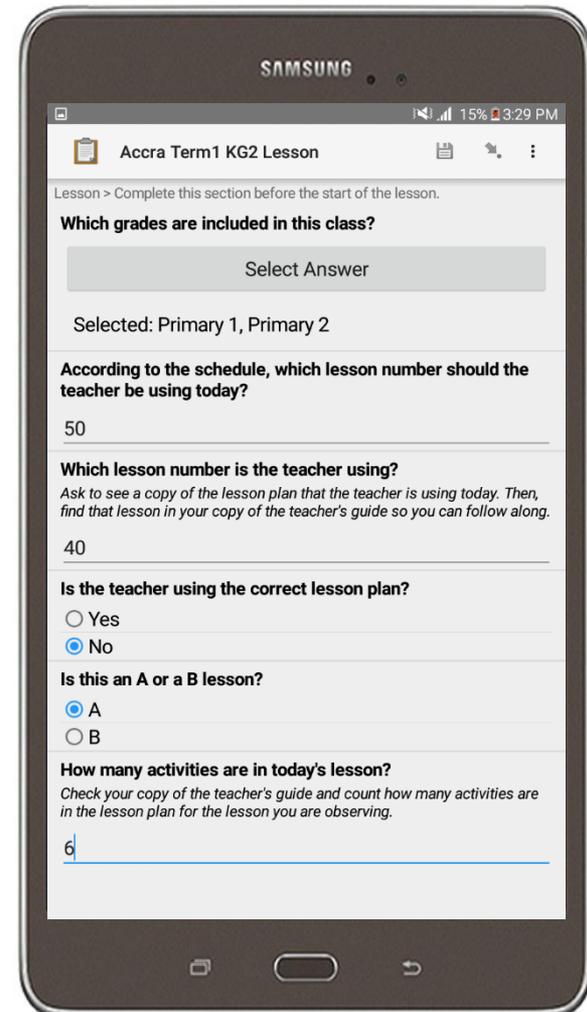
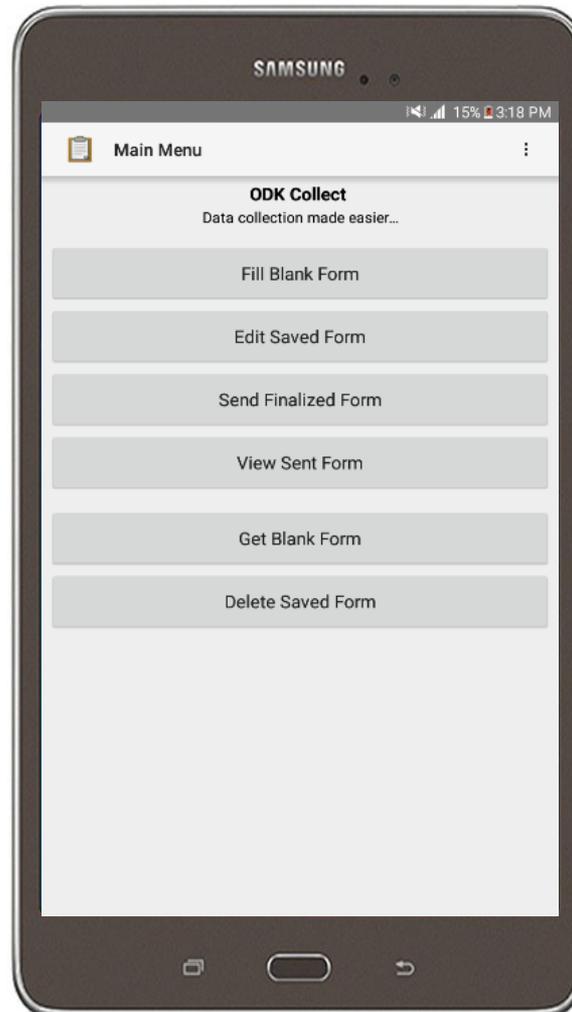
Can you physically reach your target audience?

Yes, can travel and meet in person.

Offline Mobile Forms

# Offline Mobile Forms

- Software can be installed on any smartphone or tablet
- Data is entered and stored offline and uploaded at a later time.



# Offline Mobile Forms: Technology

- **ODK (Open Data Kit)** is the primary open source software for mobile data collection.
  - SurveyCTO, KoboToolbox and several other companies base their products on the ODK technology
- **SurveyCTO** adds the ability to use iOS (Apple) devices, and a simple built in dashboard to view a summary of results
- **Kobo** offers a free service up to 10,000 uploads per month

	Uploads per month	Device Type	Setup Required	Server	Cost
<b>ODK</b>	Unlimited	Android	Yes	Any location	\$50-\$150 / month
<b>Survey CTO</b>	20,000	Android or iOS	No	AWS Europe or USA	\$220 / month
<b>Kobo Toolbox</b>	10,000	Android	No	AWS USA	Free

# Data Servers and Security

- [GDPR stands for General Data Protection Regulation](#) and is a comprehensive data protection law in the EU that replaces existing laws to strengthen the protection of personal data and the rights of the individual.
- Data hosted by Kobo and SurveyCTO is in compliance with GDPR.
- Data is hosted by Amazon Web Services (AWS). The free instance hosted by Harvard Humanitarian Institute is physically located in the United States of America, while SurveyCTO allows you to host the data in the USA or Europe.
- Kobo or SurveyCTO will never access your data unless you have given them explicit access to it. However, once uploaded data will be stored 'in the clear' on the server filesystem or within its database, which means that Kobo/SurveyCTO server administrators could potentially access it.
- To have complete control and ownership of your data, you are also free to install your own instance of ODK on your own private server.

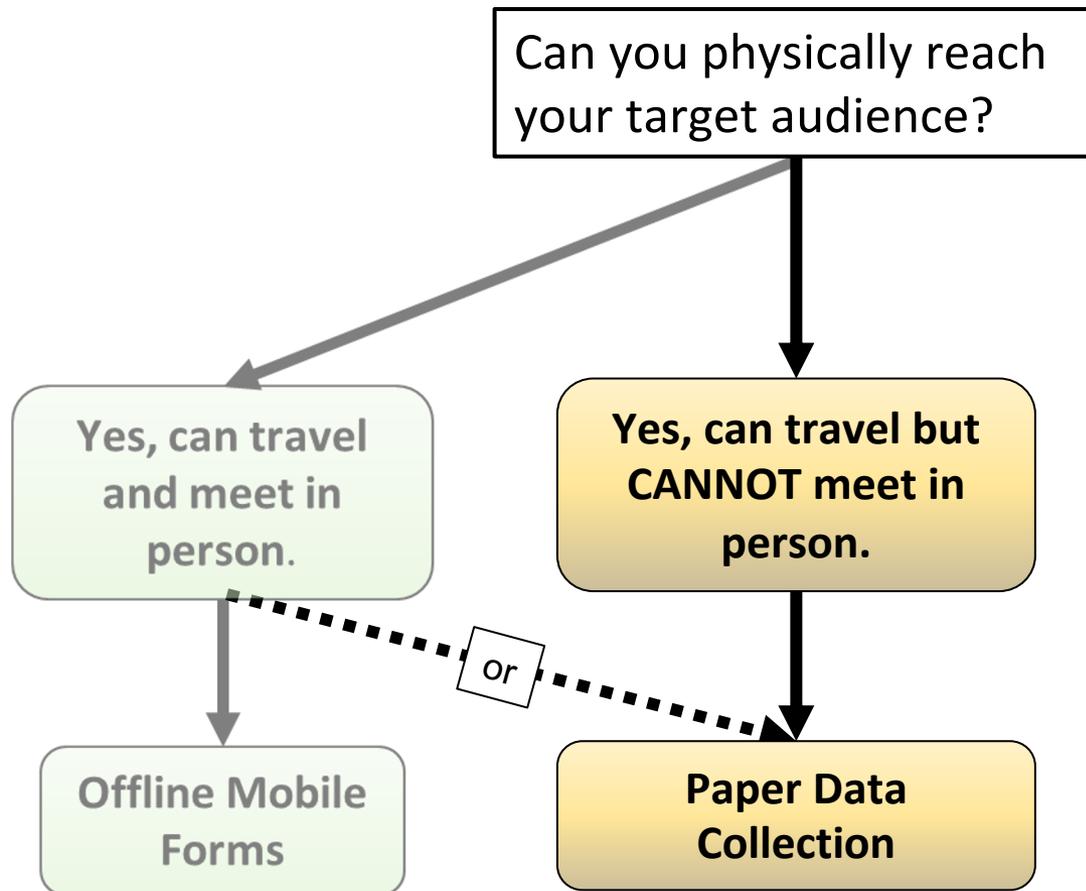
# Cloud Server Options

- A private ODK server can be installed on any cloud provider
- FHI 360 and the countries we support often use Amazon (AWS) or Microsoft (Azure).
- The monthly cost of the server depends on the amount of storage needed, and the length of the contract.



Platform	Type	Months	Payment	Price	Monthly Rate
Linux/UNIX	t3.large	12	All Upfront	\$651	\$54.25
Linux/UNIX	t3.large	36	All Upfront	\$1,347	\$37.42
Linux/UNIX	t3.xlarge	1	Monthly	~\$140	~\$140.00
Linux/UNIX	t3.xlarge	12	All Upfront	\$1,302	\$108.50
Linux/UNIX	t3.xlarge	36	All Upfront	\$2,693	\$74.81

# Accessibility



# Paper Data collection

- Prepare paper survey tools
- Deliver paper tools to central collection point
- Coordinate with beneficiaries to stagger pick up of paper tools
- Arrange time for beneficiary to return paper tools to central location
- Project staff collect paper forms and return to home or office for data entry
- Enter data either through scanning technology or computer data entry

# Data Entry

- Data entry of paper forms can be done by project staff in 4 ways:
  - Scanning “bubble” forms
  - Offline Mobile Forms
  - Online Webform/Survey
  - Excel template

# Scannable Paper

**Remark Office OMR** is the world's leading scanning software for collecting and analyzing data from plain paper OMR forms. The software collects data from paper forms containing bubbles (OMR), checkboxes, barcodes and printed text (OCR). This flexible and powerful software has been used to process tens of millions of forms since 1991, saving our users countless hours of time!

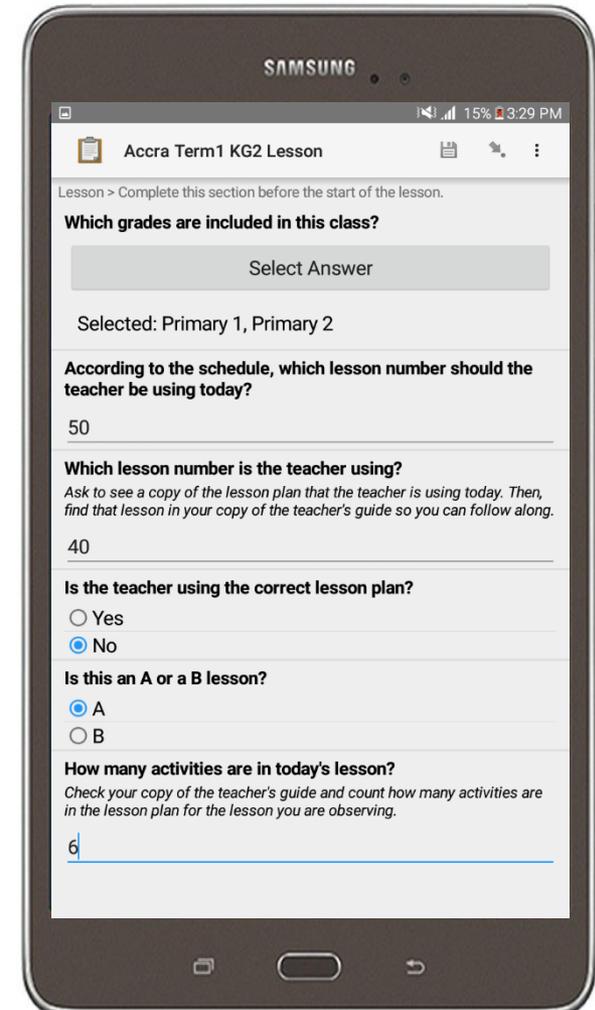
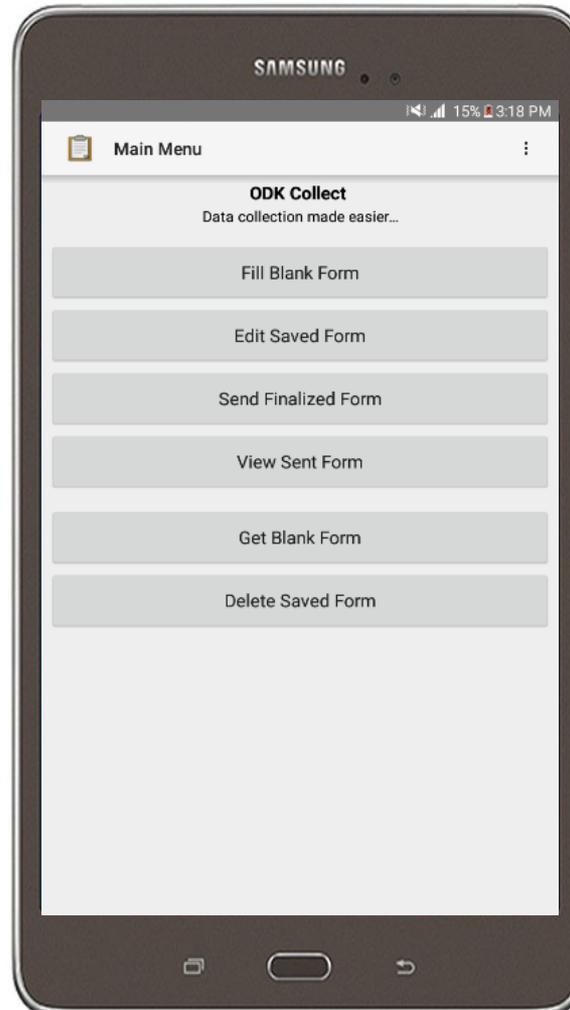


- ① Design and print your own forms using Microsoft Word or any other software
- ② Scan forms and use Remark Office OMR to recognize data
- ③ Analyze your data or export to the application of your choice!

# Offline Mobile Forms



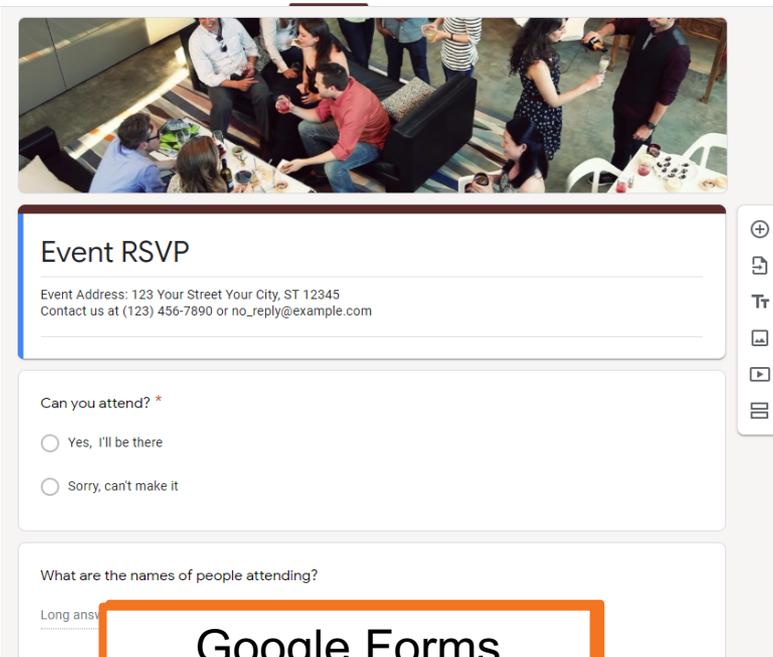
- The same software and tablets that your project previously used for in person data collection can now be used to enter data from paper forms.



# Online Surveys

- Example Options:
  - **Google Forms** and **Microsoft Forms** are free options.
  - **SurveyMonkey** is well known and offers more advanced features, but costs between \$32-\$255 per month.
  - **Enketo** allows you to automatically turn an existing ODK form into a webform, and is free when you sign up for KoboToolbox.

Questions Responses



The screenshot shows a Google Form titled "Event RSVP". It includes a header image of a group of people at an event. Below the image is a text box for the event address and contact information. The main question is "Can you attend?\*" with two radio button options: "Yes, I'll be there" and "Sorry, can't make it". Below this is another question: "What are the names of people attending?". A label "Google Forms" is overlaid on the bottom of the form.

Event RSVP

Event Address: 123 Your Street Your City, ST 12345  
Contact us at (123) 456-7890 or no\_reply@example.com

Can you attend? \*

Yes, I'll be there

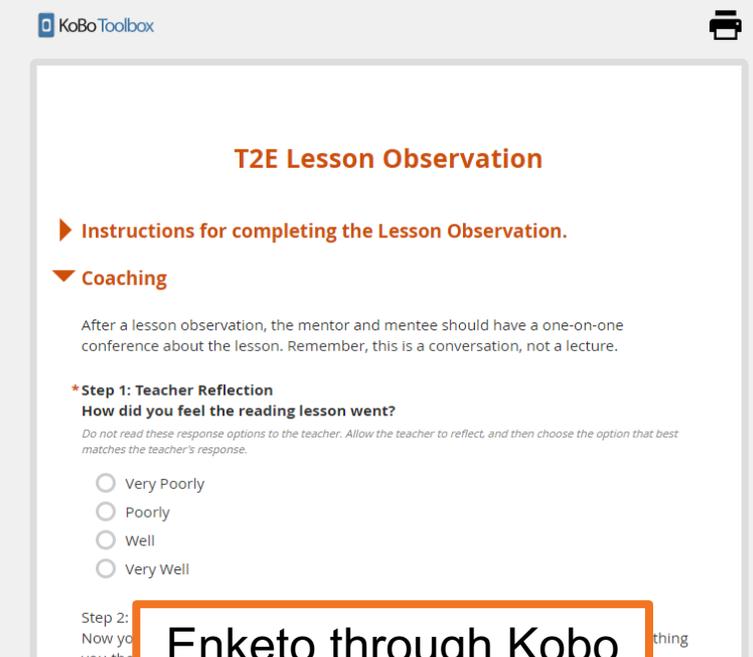
Sorry, can't make it

What are the names of people attending?

Long ans

Google Forms

KoBoToolbox



The screenshot shows an Enketo form titled "T2E Lesson Observation" within the KoBoToolbox interface. It includes instructions for completing the observation and a section for coaching. The coaching section contains a question: "\*Step 1: Teacher Reflection How did you feel the reading lesson went?" with four radio button options: "Very Poorly", "Poorly", "Well", and "Very Well". A label "Enketo through Kobo" is overlaid on the bottom of the form.

T2E Lesson Observation

► Instructions for completing the Lesson Observation.

▼ Coaching

After a lesson observation, the mentor and mentee should have a one-on-one conference about the lesson. Remember, this is a conversation, not a lecture.

\*Step 1: Teacher Reflection  
How did you feel the reading lesson went?

Do not read these response options to the teacher. Allow the teacher to reflect, and then choose the option that best matches the teacher's response.

Very Poorly

Poorly

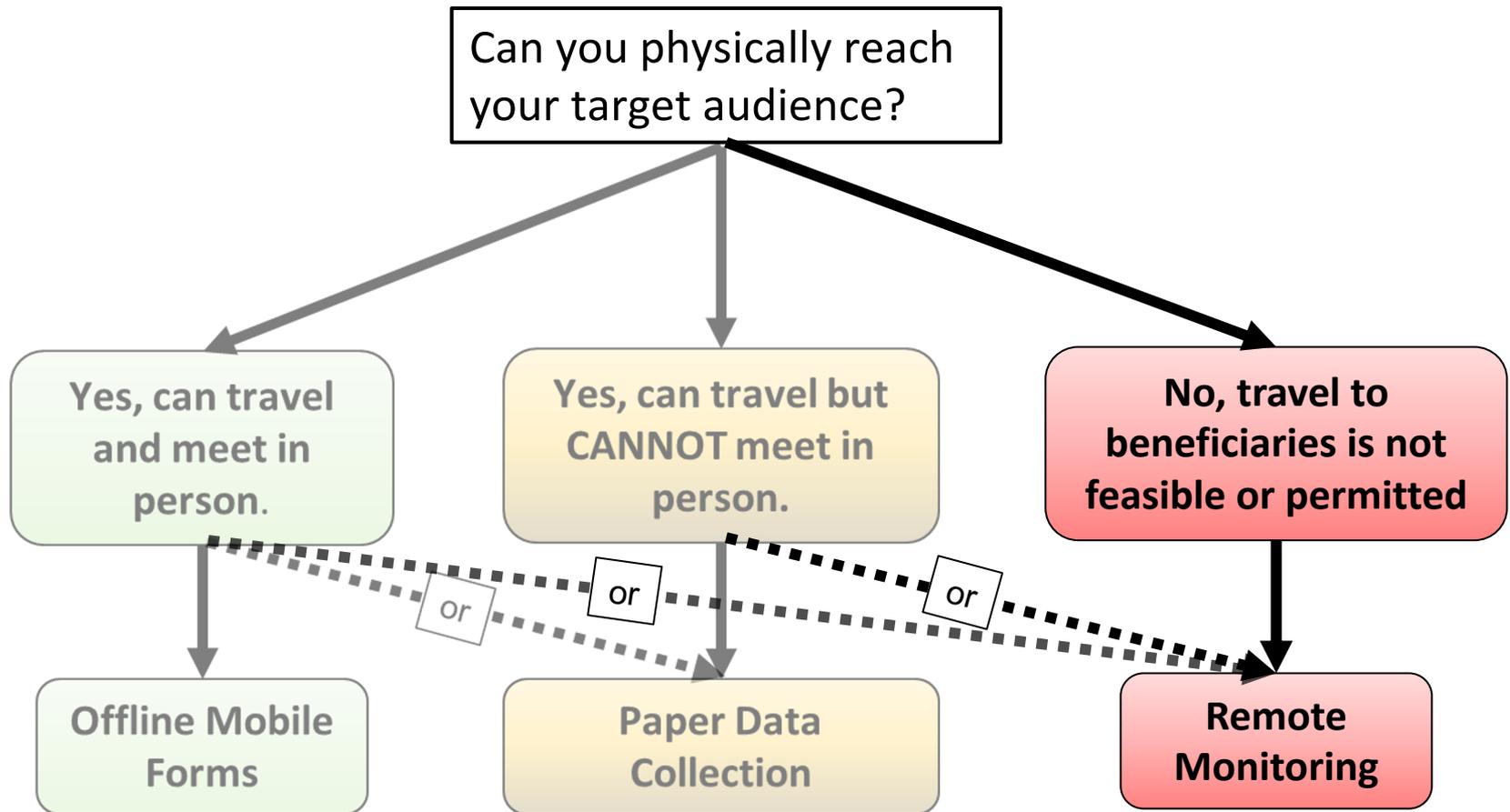
Well

Very Well

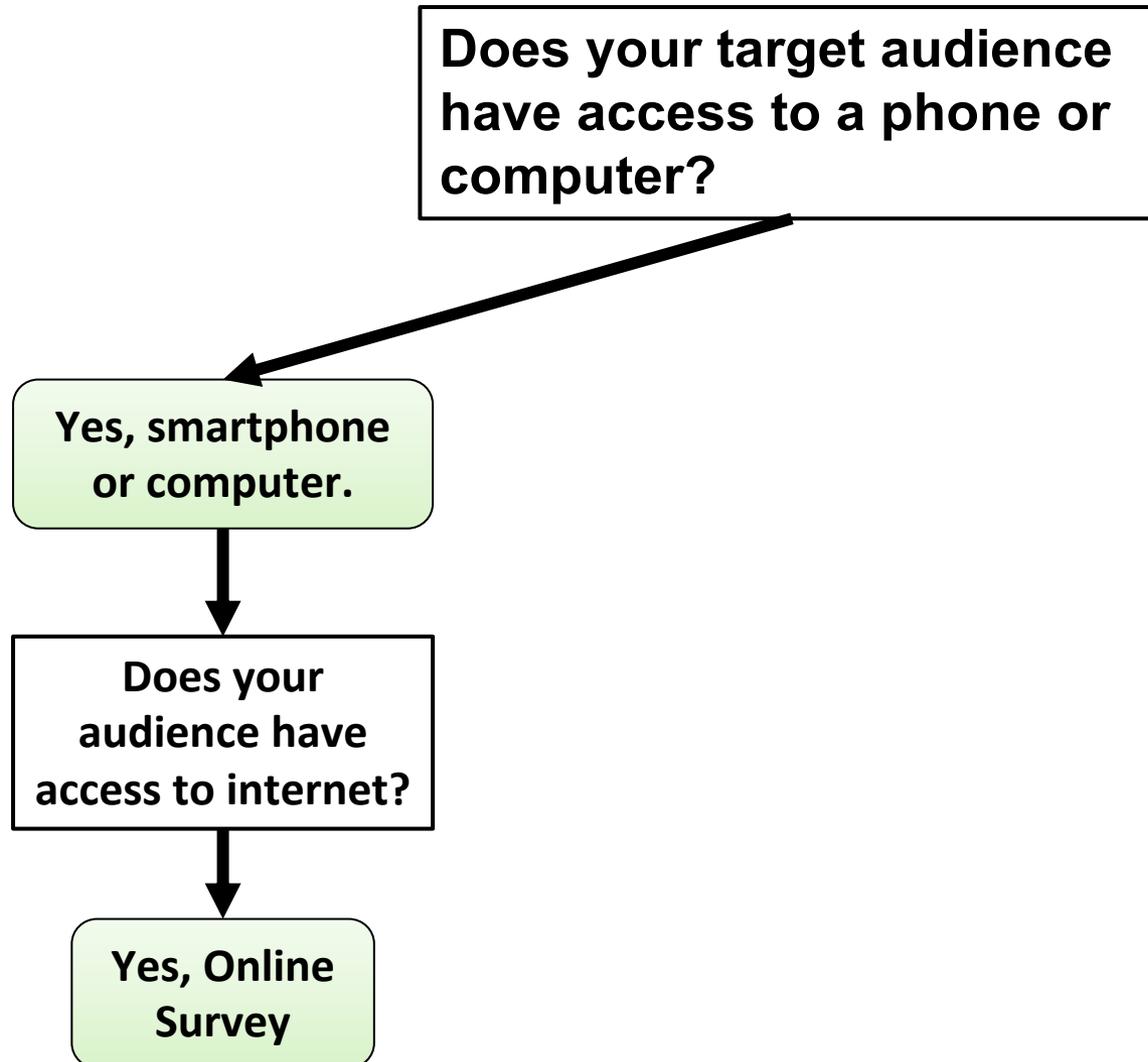
Step 2:  
Now yo  
you th

Enketo through Kobo

# Accessibility

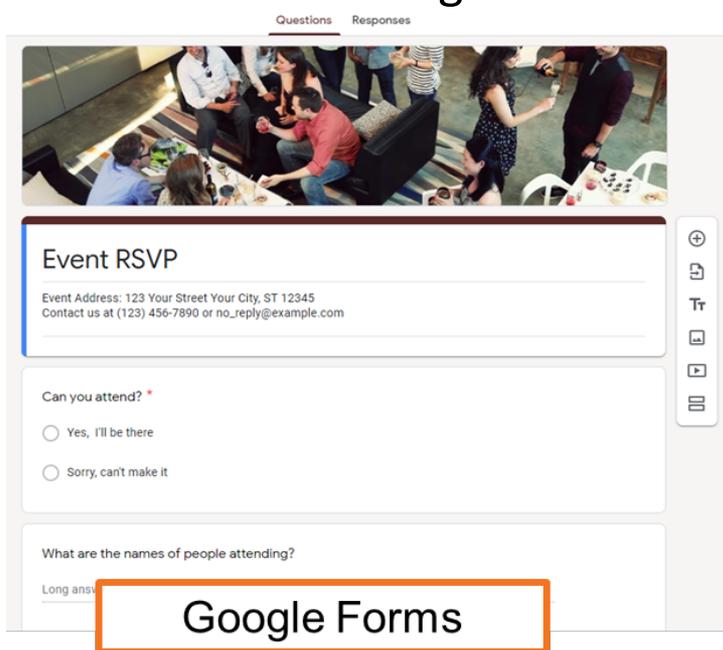


# Remote Monitoring: Access to Technology



# Online Surveys

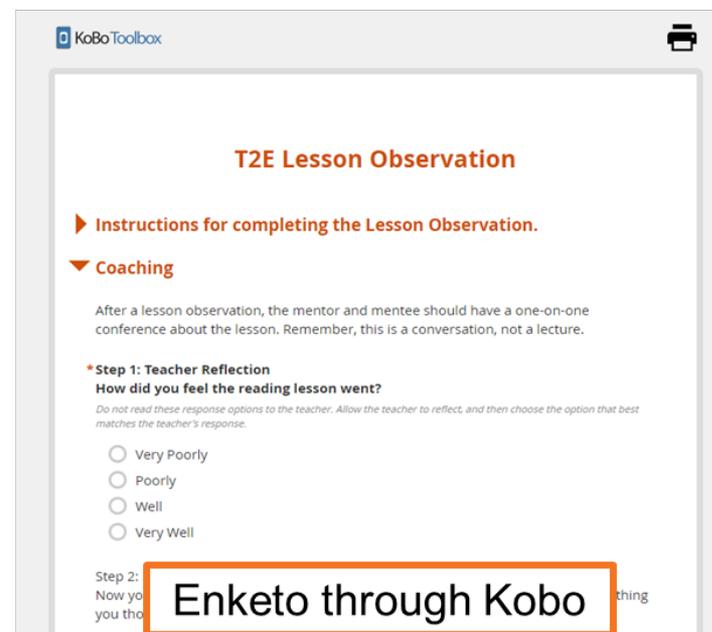
- The same technology recommended for data entry of paper forms can be used to collect data directly from your audience
  1. Shorten the URL of your survey link using bit.ly
  2. Share the bit.ly survey link with your audience through existing communication channels, such as WhatsApp, email, SMS or a project website
  3. Send reminder messages to those who do not complete the survey



The screenshot shows a Google Form titled "Event RSVP". At the top, there are tabs for "Questions" and "Responses". Below the title is a header image of a group of people in a meeting. The form contains the following fields:

- A text field for "Event Address: 123 Your Street Your City, ST 12345" and "Contact us at (123) 456-7890 or no\_reply@example.com".
- A question "Can you attend? \*" with two radio button options: "Yes, I'll be there" and "Sorry, can't make it".
- A question "What are the names of people attending?" with a "Long answer" text area.

A red box highlights the text "Google Forms" at the bottom of the form.

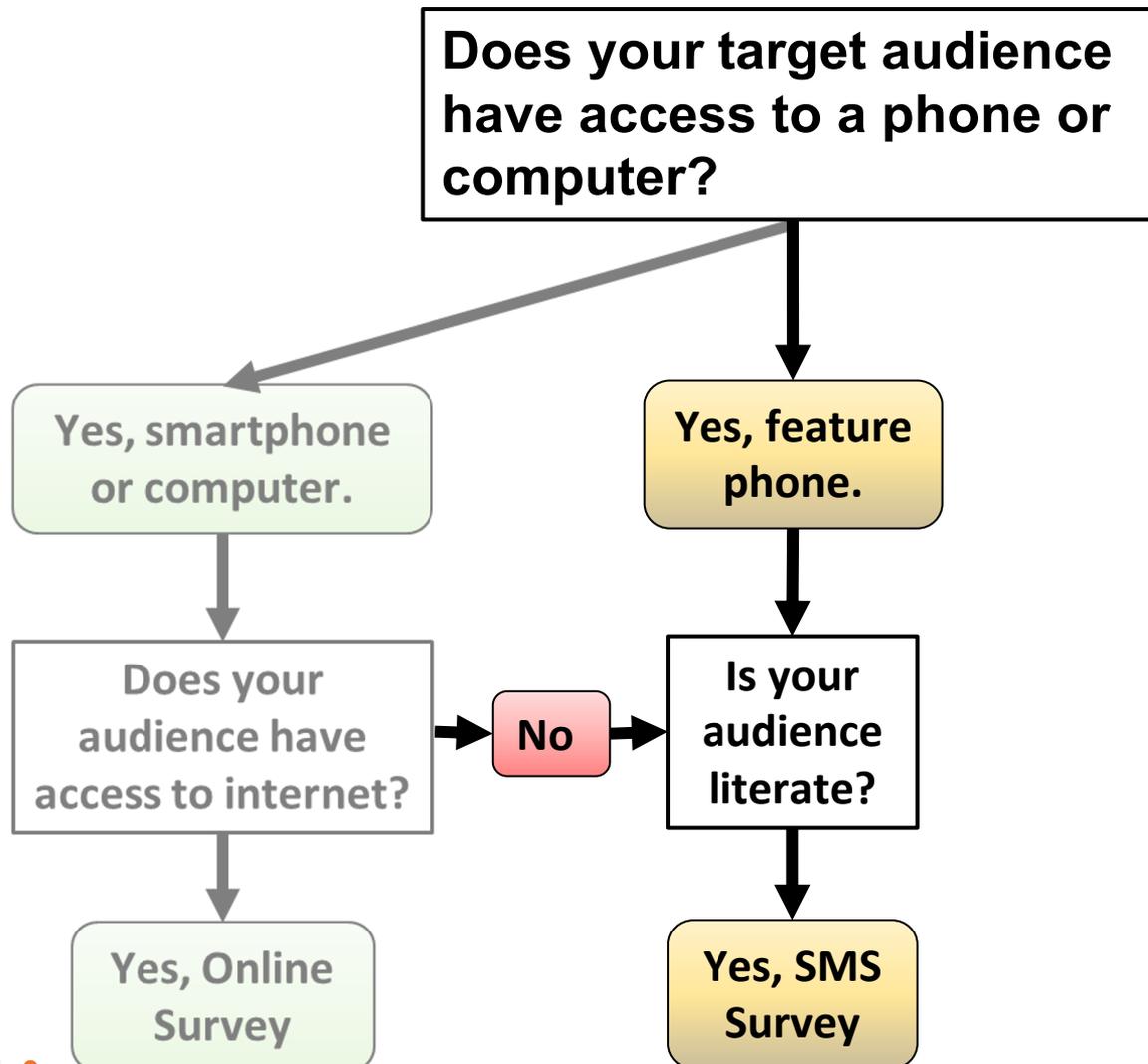


The screenshot shows an Enketo survey titled "T2E Lesson Observation". The survey is displayed on a mobile device interface with a "KoBoToolbox" logo at the top. The content includes:

- A title "T2E Lesson Observation".
- A section "Instructions for completing the Lesson Observation." with a right-pointing arrow.
- A section "Coaching" with a downward-pointing arrow, containing the text: "After a lesson observation, the mentor and mentee should have a one-on-one conference about the lesson. Remember, this is a conversation, not a lecture."
- A section "\* Step 1: Teacher Reflection" with the question "How did you feel the reading lesson went?".
- A sub-question: "Do not read these response options to the teacher. Allow the teacher to reflect, and then choose the option that best matches the teacher's response." followed by four radio button options: "Very Poorly", "Poorly", "Well", and "Very Well".
- A partially visible section "Step 2:" with the text "Now yo" and "you th".

A red box highlights the text "Enketo through Kobo" at the bottom of the survey.

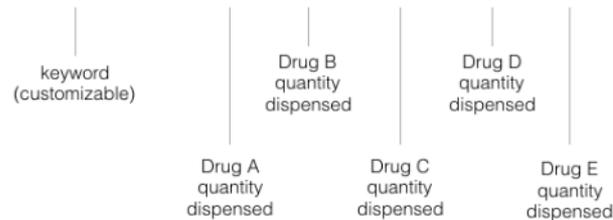
# Access to Technology



# SMS Surveys

- Structured SMS\*

PHARM#22#0#105#0#10



- Interactive SMS^

Keyword sent by participant to initiate survey

1

A

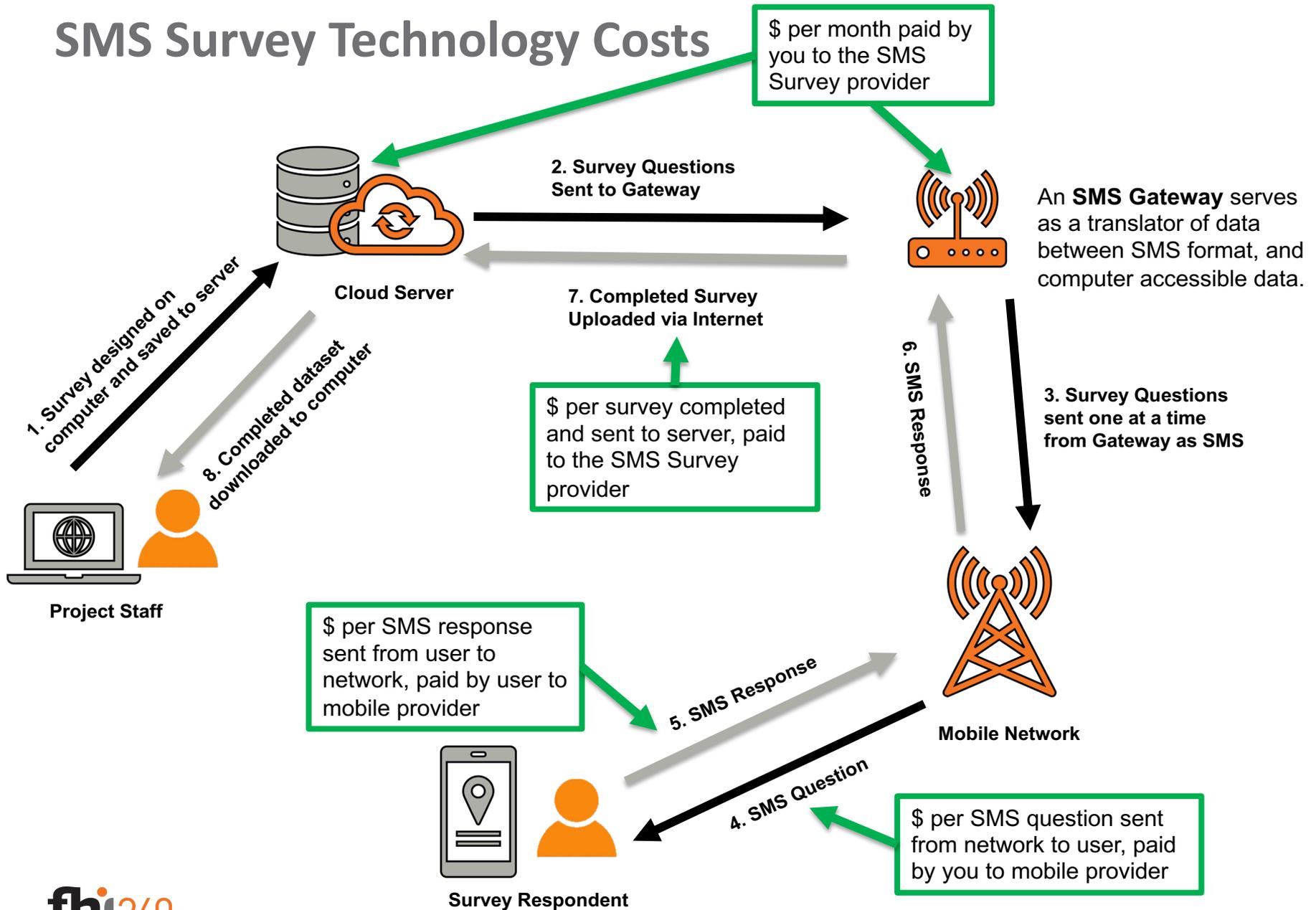
3

Great lesson

An invalid response triggers a clarification and repetition of the question.

SMS surveys can accept a combination of quantitative and qualitative responses

# SMS Survey Technology Costs



# WhatsApp

- WhatsApp Business
  - Need to register a business profile with WhatsApp
  - Lets you send mass messages to a contact list
  - Also lets people message you to join contact list

## WhatsApp Profile

The WhatsApp Business Profile provides WhatsApp users with more information about your business. To update the Business Display Name and Logo Url, please submit a [support ticket](#) with fields below.

STATUS  Approved

BUSINESS DISPLAY

NAME

COMPANY ADDRESS

COMPANY EMAIL

WEBSITE

DESCRIPTION

LINK TO LOGO

# WhatsApp Use

- WhatsApp Business

- Can only send pre-approved ‘template’ messages to start a conversation
- Template message can’t be a survey question

## Message Templates

Outbound messages to start conversations with WhatsApp users must be sent using a pre-approved message template. [Learn more about Templates](#) ↗

+	NAME	STATUS	MESSAGE
	template_1	✔ Approved	Hello {{1}} 🌟 The issue you reported - {{2}} - has now been resolved. Please let us know if you have any further questions.
	template_2	✔ Approved	Hello 🌟 . An issue you reported earlier has been resolved. Let us know when you're free to chat.
	template_3	❌ Rejected	Hello 🌟
	template_4	✔ Approved	The following Rocketbots functions have been modified: - {{1}} - {{2}} - {{3}}

# WhatsApp Business Prohibits *Most* Surveys

## The message template(s) contain content that violates WhatsApp's Business Policy

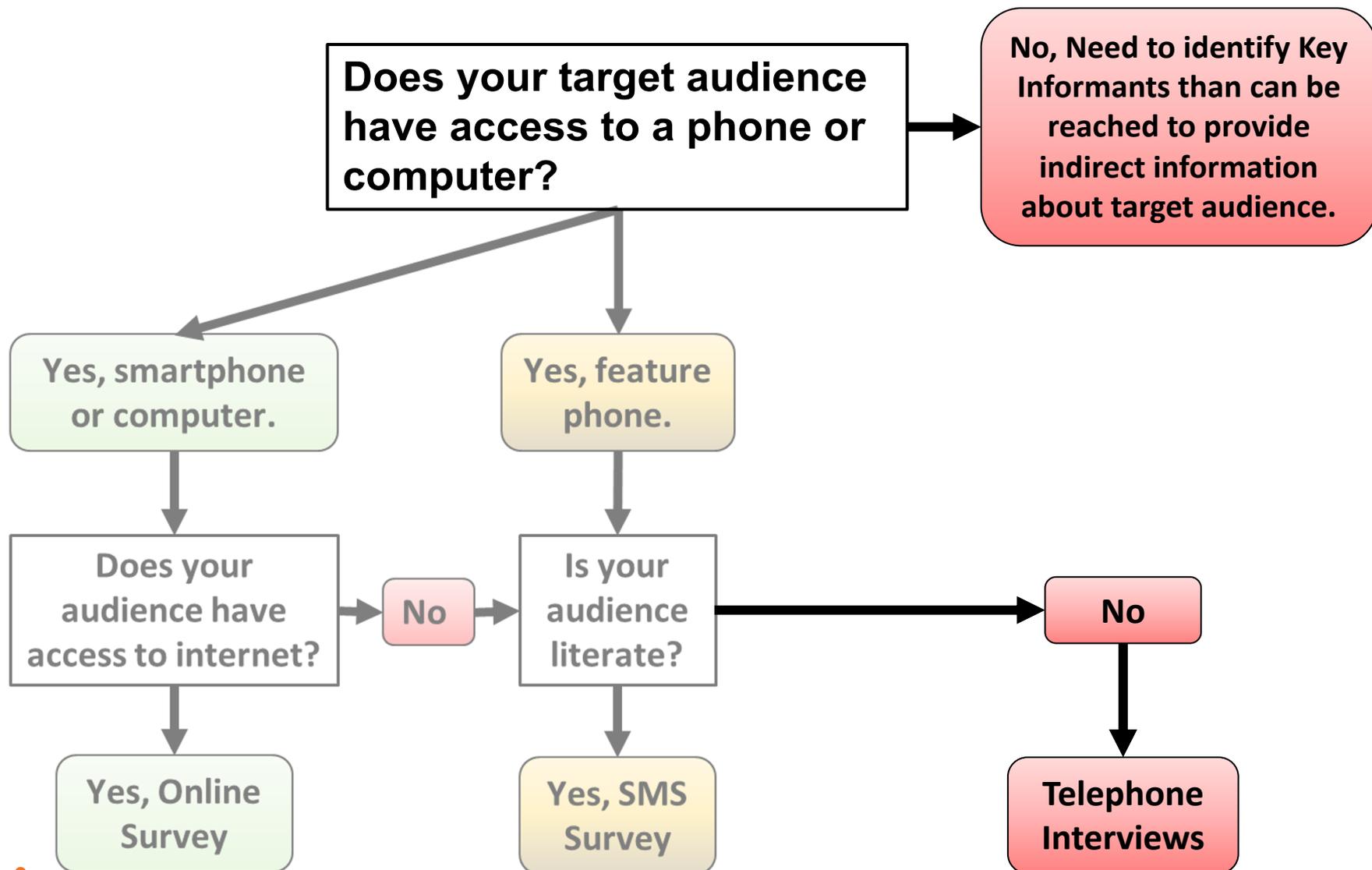
- Do not request sensitive identifiers from users. For example, do not ask people to share full length individual payment card numbers, financial account numbers, National Identification numbers, or other sensitive identifiers. This also includes not requesting documents from users that might contain sensitive identifiers.
- A survey after an experience is fine, but do not submit a survey or poll to collect data from users.  
**Example:** "Hi, we're interested in knowing how you feel about certain food groups. Do you mind participating in a survey?"
- Games, contests, tests and quizzes - anything that involves skill, competition, and/or chance - are not allowed on the platform.
- You may only initiate chats if you are sending a transactional notification. Non-transactional messages will be rejected.
  - Personalize your messages and make it clear that your customers have requested to hear back from you.  
**Example:** "Hi {{1}}, thank you for your online inquiry, I'm following up on your request to know more about our courses for the fall."

<https://developers.facebook.com/docs/whatsapp/message-templates/guidelines>

# WhatsApp 'Chatbots'

- Twilio, Nexmo and Infobip
  - These products let you create a 'chatbot' to automate WhatsApp Biz messages and responses.
  - Can only send 'chatbot' messages to
    - People who give consent by replying to 'template' message; or
    - People who initiate a conversation by messaging you with a question
  - Consent lasts for 24 hours, until consent must be obtained again.
  - During the 24-hour window, you can send unlimited messages to that contact

# Access to Technology

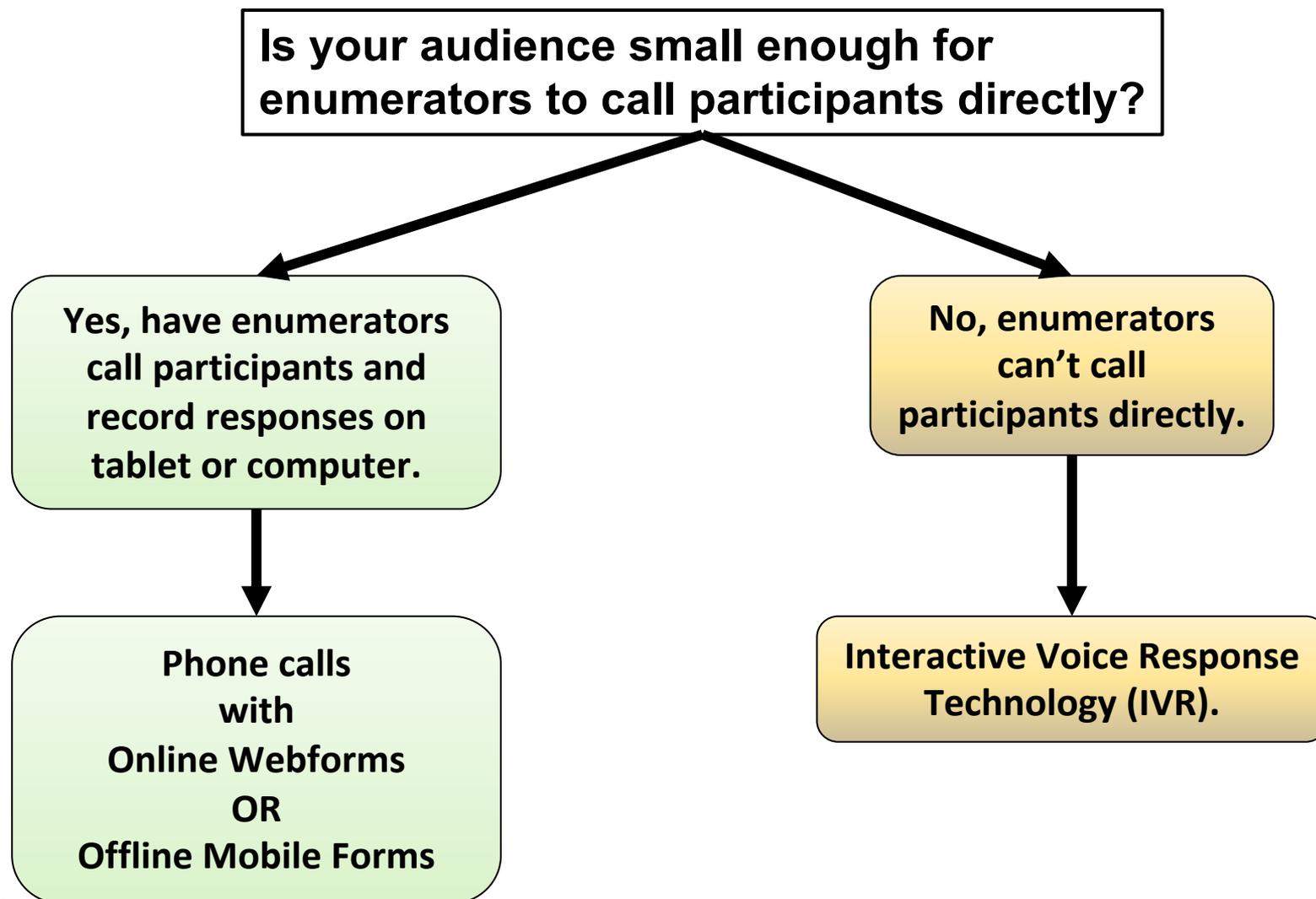


# Target Audience Analysis

<b>Nigeria</b>	<b>millions</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Population</b>	203.6	100%
<b>Mobile</b>	169.2	83%
<b>Internet</b>	85.5	42%
<b>Prepaid</b>	162.4	80%
<b>3G+</b>	101.5	50%
<b>Whatsapp</b>	80.4	39%
<b>Literate Adults</b>	126.2	62%
<b>Literate Females</b>	107.9	53%
<b>Literate Males</b>	144.6	71%

<https://datareportal.com>

# Phone Survey Capacity



# Interactive Voice Response (IVR)

- Many of the same companies that offer SMS survey platforms also offer IVR.
- I am currently working with [Viamo](#) (formerly VOTO Mobile), to use their IVR service to gather bi-weekly updates on the security and COVID-19 situation in NE Nigeria, and to share COVID-19 information through a [toll-free call-in line](#).

# Basic Data Collection Platforms\*

	Scannable Paper	Offline Mobile	Online Webform	SMS	IRV	Cost <sup>^</sup>
<b>Remark Office</b>						\$1,195
<b>ODK</b>						\$50-\$150 / month
<b>Survey CTO</b>						\$220 / month
<b>KoBoToolbox</b>						Free
<b>Enketo</b>						\$29 / month
<b>Google Forms</b>						Free
<b>Microsoft Forms</b>						Free
<b>Survey Monkey</b>						\$32-\$225 / month

# Advanced Data Collection Platforms\*

	Scannable Paper	Offline Mobile	Online Webform	SMS	IRV	Cost <sup>^</sup>
<b>Frontline SMS</b>						\$200 / month + SMS costs
<b>RapidPro</b>						\$0.02/SMS + SMS costs
<b>Magpi</b>						\$500 / month + \$0.25/survey + SMS costs
<b>Ona</b>						\$200 / month + \$0.10/SMS + SMS costs
<b>CommCare</b>						\$1200 / month + \$0.01/SMS + SMS costs
<b>DataWinners</b>						\$399 / month + \$0.10/SMS + SMS costs

# Best Practices and Considerations for Data Collection during the Pandemic

# IRB and Ethics

- For phone surveys, check with the IRB about **moving to verbal consent** if you previously required written consent.
- Keep the informed **consent script short and use simple**, clear language. Be sure it includes the purpose of the call, who is calling (organization and individual), confidentiality, and duration of the survey.
  - Pilot it internally over the phone, to get a sense of the length and whether it is easily understood. You may need to make several revisions before implementation.
- The survey protocol should log when verbal consent was given. The survey should not continue unless consent was explicitly confirmed by the enumerator.
- If doing IVR/SMS surveys, the first message can include a consent statement.

# Phone Surveys

- Ask enumerators to call members of the target audience and conduct the survey over the phone
- Enumerators can enter the survey responses in real time on a tablet or computer, using the online webforms or offline mobile applications we already discussed
- For qualitative data collection, you may need to do less focus group discussions and choose to do more individual interviews. Also consider video-conferencing to make virtual FGD and interviews more interactive and personal.
- Overall, you may need to reduce the length of the survey.
- Build in extra quality control checks, for instance a supervisor can listen in on some of the phone interviews or do call-backs.
- Test, test, test beforehand! And train enumerators!

# IVR/SMS Surveys

- Prioritize survey questions in order to limit the number of SMS messages needed.
- Initiate survey by sending invitation message to known phone numbers of audience, OR
- Share instructions on how to join the SMS survey through existing communication channels, such as posting a sign in the community.

# Response Rates

- **One of the main challenges associated with phone/online surveys is the low response rate.** Advance notice to respondents helps, such as sending an email or SMS reminder ahead of the phone call.
- **Consider sending a survey through multiple channels,** but be mindful of possible data collection mode effect.
- **During the call, it's important to maintain good rapport with the respondents.**
- **Monetary or in-kind incentives may be necessary to boost response rate and minimize selection bias in responses.** An incentive may be given using mobile money or airtime such as a study in Ghana that paid 3 cedis per call and had a 85% completion rate.
- **Consider community members, teachers, and other stakeholders who can help reach a higher response rate.** For example, while teachers are holding online classes, they might be able to remind their students to fill out a survey you sent them.

# Q&A

# THANK YOU!

## Contact us!

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## Additional Resources

- [Yvonne's blog post on Guiding Questions for Adapting MEL Plans](#)
- [Brian's blog post on Choosing the Right Monitoring Tool](#)
- [Best practices for conducting phone surveys](#)
- [Mobile phone surveys for understanding COVID-19 impacts: Sampling and Mode](#)
- [Impact evaluations in the time of COVID-19](#)