

Strengthening Orphan and Vulnerable Children Programs with Data

Significant human and financial resources have been invested worldwide in the collection of health data on populations, services and communities. Unfortunately, this information is often not used by key stakeholders to effectively inform policy and programmatic decision making. The failure to consider empirical evidence before making decisions hinders the health system's ability to respond to priority needs throughout its many levels. In an effort to address this problem, MEASURE Evaluation partnered with Pact Worldwide to apply a comprehensive data demand and use (DDU) intervention within their organization. Pact was targeted as a partner because of their interest in and commitment to improving DDU and because of their global program reach. The goal of the collaboration was to institutionalize DDU tools, curricula, and strategies in Pact's institutional guidance and official structure in order to create a culture of data use that could be diffused to their programs worldwide. An organization that has adopted data use strategies to intentionally support the use of data will be better positioned to sustain the use of data in decision-making processes. This case study explains how MEASURE Evaluation and Pact Worldwide adapted a DDU intervention to build a culture of data use within their organization and their partner organizations in Lesotho.

Pact Worldwide An Organization's Commitment to Data Use

Pact is an international nongovernmental organization (NGO) that works worldwide to improve the lives of the poor and marginalized in three key impact areas: health, livelihoods and natural resources management. It does this by building the capacity of local organizations, developing good governance practices, and cultivating markets in the countries where they work. The organization is dedicated to building country programs that are rooted in data and evidence. At the start of the collaboration with MEASURE Evaluation in May 2012, Pact had already committed to using data for organizational learning and program improvement. Pact was working toward standardizing M&E approaches and building global capacity to collect quality data; however, it lacked concrete guidance for staff and partners on how to create and sustain a culture of using data in the places where Pact works.

DDU Intervention

The literature describes efforts to improve the use of data in decision making but most describe single approaches that don't address the multiple factors that limit the use of data. Rarely is the application of one activity sufficient

IMPACT SUMMARY

Lesotho OVC Program

- Increased the number of guardians of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) receiving PSS and HIV services.
- Initiated platforms for dialogue between guardians and caregivers.

M&E System

- Rectified data collection problems (improved data collection forms, identified missing data).
- Improved Lesotho data quality supervision.
- Improved OVC programs by improving analysis & use of existing, raw data.
- Instituted Pact Worldwide global M&E standards for all country programs that includes the development of a country specific data use plan.

DDU Infrastructure

- Instituted in-depth data review meetings to discuss program performance.
- Increased data user and data producer interaction resulted in shared responsibility for M&E and DDU tasks.
- Increased individual knowledge of DDU competencies.
- Identified information needs.
- Instituted a tool to facilitate the DDU process and management.
- Developed a Pact DDU policy.

DDU INTERVENTION ACTIVITIES¹

1. Assess and improve the data use context.
2. Engage data users and data producers.
3. Improve data quality.
4. Improve data availability.
5. Identify information needs.
6. Build capacity in data use core competencies.
7. Strengthen the organization's data use infrastructure.
8. Monitor and evaluate the data use intervention.

to achieve lasting improvements in data use. Moreover, of the examples of interventions that do exist, few are described in detail or evaluated to measure their effect on decision making. MEASURE Evaluation filled this gap by developing an eight-part integrated, comprehensive intervention that addresses multiple activities that are most proximate to data use (see DDU Intervention Activities). Which of the eight activities and to what degree they are applied is dependent on the needs and context of where the intervention is being applied. An initial assessment of the data use context facilitates the adaptation of the intervention to specific contexts.

1—Assessing and Improve the DDU Context

MEASURE Evaluation assessed the data use context at Pact headquarters in March 2012, and the Lesotho Country office in September 2012. The baseline rapid assessment methodology collected information from 63 individuals through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, a participatory workshop, the implementation of an adapted organizational and behavioral assessment,² and a document review. Individuals from Pact at headquarters and Lesotho, and NGO partners in Lesotho,³ participated in the interviews. Data were analyzed, triangulated, and grouped by theme according to the eight DDU intervention activity areas.

By looking at how the organization functioned at both the headquarters and country program levels, the intervention was refined and adapted for Pact. At the end of November 2012, programmatic recommendations and an eight month work plan to strengthen the data use culture in Pact were finalized.

The Lesotho program works to support local NGOs to respond better to the HIV/AIDS epidemic through orphan and vulnerable children (OVC) and HIV prevention programs. Of note is that two months after the DDU strengthening work plan was developed, Pact received notice from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) mission in Lesotho that the Lesotho program was being closed due to a shift in donor priorities. Half of their partner programs were scheduled for closure within the next two months and the remaining half were scheduled for closure in the next five months. At the same time, the anticipated project funding for the last half of the fiscal year was not allocated. Thus, Pact had to prioritize allocation of remaining funds to priority activities and project close out. As a result, many DDU activities were either cancelled or reduced. Even in this context, Pact remained committed to improving the DDU context in their programs. The following sections describes each intervention activity as it was implemented in Pact Lesotho.

1) Nutley T, Reynolds HW. *Improving the use of health data for health system strengthening*. Global Health Action 2013, 6:20001.

2) The organizational and behavioral assessment is part of the Performance of Routine Information Systems Management (PRISM) tool.

3) Participating NGOs included Lesotho Network of AIDS Services Organizations (LENASO), Phelisanang Bophelong (PB), Kick for Life (K4L), Society of Women Against HIV and AIDS in Lesotho (SWAALES), Lesotho Inter-Religious AIDS Consortium (LIRAC).

“This was an eye-opener. In my organization, it was mostly me and the program officer who made decisions regarding program implementation. The involvement of the national M&E coordinator was very minimal. Now we can sit with the national coordinator and discuss program issues.”

— LIRAC staff member (Pact partner NGO)

2—Identify and Engage Data Users and Data Producers

Improving the interaction between individuals who manage M&E systems—the data producers—and professionals who use data in program management and improvement—the data users—facilitates the use of data. The interaction builds ownership of data so that when data-informed decisions are made, the necessary buy-in exists to move the decision forward. Prior to the partnership with MEASURE Evaluation, Pact involved both data users and producers in the M&E process however, data users were infrequently involved in the analysis and interpretation of data. As a result, rarely did Pact and its partner NGOs hold conversations that addressed topics beyond the status of meeting program targets. Also, rarely did program staff share their reports collected as part of supervision visits with the M&E team. As a result the team was limited to examining performance against targets and an existing data source was not being used.

To improve data user and producer interaction, Pact Lesotho implemented two initiatives. Firstly, Pact developed a plan to convene more in-depth and participatory data use/review meetings. These meetings involved M&E and program staff from Pact and partner NGOs. The meetings were expanded to include the review of qualitative data submitted as part of monthly partner supervision visits in addition to the monthly/quarterly monitoring data that was regularly reviewed. The qualitative data, which were collected by program staff, became a rich data source that had not been reviewed or used in a systematic way. To facilitate the use of these data, the supervision data collection tool was revised to include a standard table to record problems identified during the visit and recommend actions to address the problems. Guidance for collecting supervision data was also developed and a core team of M&E and program staff was assigned to analyze the data monthly and capture trends in problems identified and actions taken. It was also agreed that during the data review meetings time would be allocated for data interpretation as it relates to program performance and improvement. This process relied on participation of program staff and thus engendered more meaningful participation of the end data users in the M&E process. It also began to distribute responsibility for M&E tasks to a wider than the M&E unit. Lastly, it prompted discussion around the causes of the problems and generated additional questions about the program that needed answers. This sparked the demand for additional data.

Also based on this new directive, Pact organized in-depth data review workshops with six partner NGOs. Previously, data were reviewed as part of general partners meetings; however, due to the multiple topics being discussed, little time was dedicated to data review. As a result, only performance against targets was discussed. In the in-depth meetings, more time was spent analyzing data by site, by service, and by program component to understand program performance better. These meetings also engendered program management to ask questions and request specific analysis from the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) staff. Two NGOs, the Lesotho Inter-Religious AIDS Consortium (LIRAC) and Society of Women Against HIV and AIDS in Lesotho

“It [the data review] has helped us to see the gaps in our program. Seeing that we had provided economic strengthening services to only 1%, of the OVC served, 3% served with protection and legal support and 5% served with health care services showed us that we are not providing beneficiaries with a comprehensive service package. We have been made to look beyond meeting the target and make a deeper analysis to appreciate the minimum combination of services each OVC served has received. We are now planning that in the next fiscal year, the majority of children served should receive at least three of the six services we provide.”

— LIRAC staff member

(SWAALES), identified further questions about their programs based on their findings. Specifically, LIRAC noted that volunteers providing OVC services were only providing services to children and were not providing services such as nutrition counseling, child protection and psychosocial services (PSS) to eligible adults within OVC households. Based on this finding, LIRAC supported its four affiliate NGOs to sensitize caregivers to provide these services to eligible adults. As a result, a total of 150 guardians were reached with PSS and HIV education in the following two months. These activities also opened platforms for dialogue between guardians and caregivers. SWALLES, through their data review, identified three sites where education, health care and legal protections services were extremely low. They did not know if there was a programmatic problem similar to what had been found in LIRAC or if the services were actually being implemented and not recorded. After an investigation, it was confirmed that the services were actually being implemented but not recorded. Volunteers were re-trained to record this information.

3—Identify Information Needs

By focusing on what decision makers need to know to run health programs effectively and on the upcoming decisions that they have to make, information that is directly linked to decision making can be collected. Pact and the NGOs they support rarely dedicated time to understanding their information needs beyond what was required for regular reporting. They recognized the need to do this but did not have a process or dedicated time to accomplish it. In response to this, a framework for linking data with action (FLDWA) was completed. The FLDWA is a management tool that brings together data users and data producers to identify programmatic questions, existing data available to answer those questions and data gaps. Through the application of the FLDWA, Pact identified an important question that needed a response — what difference did our program create at the partner and beneficiary levels? Existing data in the form of organizational capacity assessment reports, routine service provision data, and OVC needs assessment data were analyzed to inform the question. The analysis showed improved organizational capacity of partners to deliver services, improved comprehensiveness of service delivery packages provided by partners and an increased utilization of services by beneficiaries. The findings of the analysis will be used to write up the end of program report, highlighting key lessons learned for application by other Pact staff and stakeholders implementing similar programs.

4—Improve Data Quality

For consistent data use to occur, data need to be of high quality so that data users are confident that data they are consulting are accurate, complete, and timely. Without quality data, demand for data drops, data-informed decision making does not occur, and program efficiency and effectiveness suffer. As part of the M&E process, Pact has a strong data quality system in place. NGOs are required to check site level data however this does not regularly occur. The



Photo by P. Virot via WHO

assessment also found that many Pact and NGO staff do not fully understand the value of data beyond reporting to donors and continued funding. As a result, the data quality schedule was not being prioritized and maintained in all partner NGO sites. Pact committed to strengthening the data quality process by including data quality follow-up as part of each NGO's M&E plan. This plan was not fully implemented however, due to the early project closeout. Pact did, however, revise their partner M&E plans by adding a section on how to use the data collected under each indicator.

5—Improve Data Availability

Data availability, defined as data synthesis, data communication and access to data needs to be strong to support the use of information in decision making. Pact had systems in place to synthesize and communicate data to the NGOs with whom they work, to the headquarters office and the donor, USAID Lesotho. Data were also stored locally which facilitated access. The assessment identified areas for improvement however, due to the budget constraints, none of them were implemented.

6—Build Capacity in Data Use Core Competencies

To improve sustainable demand for and use of data in decision making, individual capacity in core competencies to demand and use data must exist at all levels of the organization. Competencies include skills in data analysis, interpretation, synthesis, and presentation, and the development of data-informed programmatic recommendations. Pact and NGO employees had varying

skill levels in data use core competencies. They also had a varying understanding of the value of data to program improvement. In addition, advanced skills in outcome and impact evaluation, were lacking which inhibited their ability to fully understand program performance.

To address skill gaps, a data demand and use concepts and tools online training course was taken by four Pact and 20 NGO employees. The course teaches the role of data in decision making, the context of decision making, the determinants of data use, and the importance of data sharing and feedback. It also builds skills for applying data demand and use tools, such as the FLDWA. All 24 individuals completed the post-test with a passing score.

In addition to this training, a training designed to build understanding of when to consider qualitative data to evaluate program performance was implemented with five Pact and 23 NGO employees. The training built skills in qualitative data collection methods appropriate for answering questions about program performance as well as applying qualitative data findings to program improvements. A pre- and post-test administered at the training to measure knowledge of basic concepts in qualitative research showed an increase in knowledge gained from 66% correctly answered questions on the pre-test and 82% on the post test.

7—Strengthen the Organization's Data Use Infrastructure

It is critical for organizations to take ownership of their data use processes. This happens when data demand and use tools, concepts and strategies are institutionalized within an organization. An organization that has adopted data use strategies into their official structure to clearly support data use will be better positioned to sustain the use of data in the decision making process. To this end, Pact developed a data use policy to outline the new data use intervention as stated in the DDU strengthening work plan. The policy provided specific country-level guidance for implementing activities and strategies to improve the use of data in decision making as identified by the assessment. The policy outlined specific roles and responsibilities for data use tasks, the schedule for data review meetings, how and when to use the FLDWA and processes for ensuring data quality. The policy is designed as a practical road map for Pact to connect the M&E process to decision making processes around program monitoring, management, and improvement.

“We say that M&E is a management tool. The DDU initiative has brought out that management component in a way that wasn’t brought out before systematically. I would recommend that we hold more interactive data analysis sessions as group of partners so that we can learn from each other what we are doing in our individual organizations.”

— SWAALES staff member
(Pact partner NGO)

8—Monitor and Evaluate the DDU Intervention

Throughout the implementation of the intervention, MEASURE Evaluation conducted monthly follow-up calls with Pact Lesotho to discuss work plan progress and provide technical assistance on work plan activities. In July 2013, eight months after intervention implementation began, changes in the use of data in decision making were documented. While a formal follow-up assessment was not conducted, the end line information was collected through monthly follow-up, the review of monitoring documents and conversations with key Pact and NGO staff to understand progress against the work plan and improvements in the DDU indicators. Table 1 shows changes in DDU indicators from the baseline to the follow-up as assessed by MEASURE Evaluation staff. The eight indicators map directly to each intervention activity. A score of 0 (absent) indicates that the activity being measured is nonexistent. A score of 1 (nascent) indicates that the initial steps of activity implementation are present. A score of 2 (emerging) indicates that the activity is present but in an ad hoc and unsystematic way. A score of 3 (robust) indicates that the activity is regularly and systematically implemented.

Table 1—Progress against DDU Indicators December 2012–July 2013

DDU Intervention Activities	Indicator	Baseline Level	Endline Level
Assess and improve data use context	DDU interventions regularly implemented	1	2
Engage data users and producers	Data users & producers regularly discussing data in relation to program improvement	1	2
Improve data quality	Data quality assessment score improved	2	NA
Improve data availability	Multi-directional feedback mechanisms in place & functioning	1	2
Identify information needs	Reviewing data to identify additional information needs	0	1
Build capacity in data use core competencies	Individual knowledge of DDU core competencies increased	1	2
Strengthen organizational DDU infrastructure	Regular implementation of organizational supports	0	1
Monitor, evaluate, communicate results of DDU interventions	Promotion of DDU success stories	0	1

The MEASURE Evaluation data use intervention succeeded in improving data use as measured by the DDU indicators. All indicators increased with the exception of the data quality indicator. Because of the project close out, Pact was unable to conduct a regularly scheduled data quality assessment that would have provided the data needed to see changes in this area. The DDU intervention, although reduced from its original scope due to budget cuts, equipped Pact and its partners with useful and practical tools to enhance learning by establishing a comprehensive approach to improving data use. The formalization of the practice to regularly review performance data with data producers and data users allowed the project and its’ partner NGOs to take proactive measures to act on significant findings. The intervention also

highlighted the missed opportunities experienced by both Pact and its partners to improve program performance from not reviewing, discussing and using existing qualitative data to manage programs. In addition, the skills gained through the general DDU and qualitative analysis trainings enabled Pact and their partners to fill some of their capacity gaps. The entire process illuminated the best practice of M&E being everybody's business rather than a responsibility solely of the M&E team. Though not implemented by Pact because of the project close out, the recommended revision of job descriptions to include DDU tasks and responsibilities was agreed to be a practical way to affect this. The improvements measured by the DDU indicators in Table 1 indicates that progress toward developing a culture of data use is feasible even within a context of budget constraints, shifting priorities and limited time frames.

Fostering Change

Fostering change is a key element of the successful uptake of any intervention. Identifying and understanding the benefits of change, and people's perceptions of those benefits, allows you to put ownership into the hands of the implementers of change: those who must actually alter the way they do their work at a service delivery site. Five perceived characteristics of an intervention are key in influencing whether implementers view it favorably or unfavorably:⁴

- **Advantage**—offers clear benefits to them and to the people they serve.
- **Compatibility**—is consistent with accepted organizational values.
- **Simplicity**—is easy to understand and apply.
- **Trialability**—can be carried out without seriously disrupting current services.
- **Observability**—can be measured to show concrete examples of progress.

4) Implementing Best Practices Consortium. *A Guide for Fostering Change to Scale Up Effective Health Services*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization and U.S. Agency for International Development; 2007.



Photo: pactworld.org/country/lesotho

In the case of Lesotho, these factors were addressed in the following ways:

- **Advantage and simplicity**—the intervention was clearly defined into eight activities and supported by concrete guidance, training, and tools.
- **Compatibility**—the Pact mission statement included an organizational commitment to using data for learning and improvement.
- **Trialability**—many DDU activities were already part of the M&E process but were not being fully implemented.
- **Observability**—the intervention was monitored, assessed and successes communicated

To influence and foster the change process, we identified change agents who could clearly convey the benefits of the intervention to Pact staff and their partner NGOs. The change agents in this case were the M&E director and the vice president for program advancement at Pact headquarters and the project director and the senior M&E advisor at Pact Lesotho. The sustained engagement and leadership of these individuals coupled with an intervention that addressed the barriers to data use at multiple levels (as opposed to a one off training) and MEASURE Evaluation's support through field visits and regular phone calls, laid the foundation for the improvements in the data use culture experienced by Pact and partner NGOs in Lesotho.