Sustainability Planning, Implementation, and Transition:

A Case Study from the MEASURE Evaluation–Tanzania Associate Award

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Background

The MEASURE Evaluation–Tanzania Associate Award (MEval-TZ) operated from 2015 to 2019 with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), and the President's Malaria Initiative (PMI). Its ambitious goal was to sustainably improve integration and effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems to strengthen Tanzania's health information systems (HIS). To achieve this goal, the project implemented activities categorized under three intermediate result areas (see text box), covering both the Tanzania mainland and Zanzibar at several levels of the health system and with different HIS.

A participatory monitoring and evaluation workshop with village leaders in Mbeya. Photo: Mary Freyder, MEASURE Evaluation

To support these goals, the project had a diverse set of activities, ranging from improving national M&E systems to developing a strong network of M&E professionals. The project pursued two crosscutting activities: gender integration and sustainability and collaboration. These aimed to ensure that all project activities benefitted from male and female participation and that they were sustainable.[1]

MEval–TZ promoted local capacity building and sustainability as core features of its approach. It also included an activity—"Local Learning and Evaluation for Ownership and Sustainability"—to track progress over the life of the project. That activity offered an opportunity to understand how to conceptualize, envision, and operationalize local ownership and sustainability, and to determine the best way to deal with uncertainties that might arise.

MEASURE Evaluation–Tanzania's Intermediate Results

IR 1: Policy makers use quality data to develop policies and guidelines, and advocate for community health and social service programs.

IR 2: Quality data routinely used by local governments, community providers and facilities to improve program planning, budgeting and program implementation.

IR 3: Increased evidence base for community health and social service programs.

[1] Activities were added and dropped during the project. At the beginning, the work plan called for 15 activities: (1) facilitation of improved data demand and use at the national level; (2) improved national M&E systems; (3) local learning and evaluation for ownership and sustainability; (4) institutionalization of M&E procedures, policies, and support mechanisms within local governments, facilities, and communities; (5) support for referral systems strengthening; (6) routine collection of health data and integration in DHIS 2; (7) support for collection and integration of data on most vulnerable children (MVC); (8) increased availability and use of sex-disaggregated data; (9) support for malaria surveillance and research through Ifakara Health Institute; (10) small grants for research development and support; (11) MVC research; (12) evaluation of community savings groups for MVC caregivers; (13) increasing opportunities for M&E professional development; (14) M&E professional networks; and (15) support for organizational development to institutionalize M&E.

"Sustainability is a term on the lips of many development workers, but its operationalization remains a challenge. For the MEASURE Evaluation–Tanzania Associate Award, we broke the term down into an operationally meaningful construct, by envisioning what the health information system in Tanzania should be like five years later, at the end of our project.

"We wished that, by 2020, the health information system in Tanzania would provide reliable and timely information, routinely used by decisionmakers. And this gave birth to our notion of sustainability as the use of available resources to ensure that there is persistent, self-reliant, and durable health information and services.

"We have deliberately worked with and through government structures, systems, and processes and promoted collaboration and partnership with other stakeholders, to ensure that our efforts to strengthen data quality and data use will outlive our project—that is, become sustainable! And we trust we have been somewhat successful, given many of the results we have seen. Two examples are the development of monitoring and evaluation systems for the most vulnerable children program, and tools and training resources for data demand and use that are now official government resources rather than our own resources."

—Willis Odek, chief of party, MEASURE Evaluation–Tanzania Associate Award

Planning

The project began sustainability planning with a series of dialogues with the project team members and a two-day workshop in Dar-es-Salaam. The workshop was to develop a sustainability framework and a common understanding of how the project would define "sustainability," how sustainability cuts across all activities, and how to collect and compile data to regularly measure progress toward sustainability. The framework was devised using a sustainability assessment developed by the Center for Design and Research in Sustainability (CEDARS), based at ICF, a partner of MEval-TZ.[2]

This approach identified and analyzed the complex system within which the project would be implemented. Understanding the system helped the sustainability activity team map crucial stakeholders and analyze their competing interests. The team conducted a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis, and then developed a sustainability scenario.[3] These exercises led to development of a project-specific sustainability framework that formalized the definition, vision, outcomes, and indicators of sustainability and to a roadmap for monitoring indicators of sustainability outcomes and achievements. Sustainability was defined to include processes to ensure that an HIS is stronger, more resilient, and able to perform to a high standard of reliability, eventually being operated and maintained with minimal external technical support. The framework outlined sustainability outcomes for the project in the following ways:

- High-quality HIS data
- Health information resources and structures
- Efficient and adaptable processes for generating data
- Demand for and use of HIS data
- A supportive enabling environment

The goal was that by 2020, the Tanzania HIS would provide reliable and timely information that decision makers use routinely.

Implementation

The sustainability activity team maintained ongoing dialogue with activity managers on how to effectively collect and report on sustainability data. The activity team also introduced a "sustainability checklist" to effectively capture what project implementation processes, approaches, and policies would need to be changed to achieve the sustainable outcomes envisioned in the framework.[4] The checklist, which draws from sustainability checklist resources from ICF[5] and others,[6] aimed to facilitate an open and honest discussion within

[2] Eric Sarriot, Jim Ricca, Jennifer Yourkavitch, Leo Ryan, and the Sustained Health Outcomes (SHOUT) Group. (2008). Taking the long view: A practical guide to sustainability planning and measurement in community-oriented health programming. Calverton, MD, USA: Macro International Inc. Retrieved from http://cedarscenter.com/resources/Taking_the_Long_View__A_Project_Manager%E2%80%99s_Sustainability_Manual.pdf

[3] For details about these processes, read Brinkerhoff, D. & Jacobstein, D., (2015). Systems thinking and institutional performance: Retrospect and prospect on USAID policy and practice. Retrieved from http://www.cedarscenter.com/resources/BrinkerhoffJacobstein_SystemsUSAID_IDG_working_paper_150417.pdf

[4] These changes would be tracked through various subelements within five broad categories: (a) mapping effort of the local system with actors and stakeholders; (b) development of local system vision and a sustainability scenario; (c) project plans and designs; (d) collaboration, learning, and problem solving in implementation; and (e) the socioecological environment of the project.

[5] Arscott-Mills, S., Foreman, M., & Graham, V. (2012). Family planning sustainability checklist: A project assessment tool for designing and monitoring sustainability of community-based family planning services. Calverton, MD, USA: ICF International. Retrieved from http://www.cedarscenter.com/resources/USAID_FP_Sustainability_Checklist_2012_lowres.pdf

[6] Choi-Fitzpatrick, et al. (2014). A resource guide for enhancing potential for sustainable impact–food and nutrition security. Retrieved from http://www.pciglobal.org/PCI_Sustainability_Toolkit_English.pdf

each activity team to reflect on the successes and lessons learned and help the teams assess their progress in relation to sustainability outcomes.[7] The sustainability activity team collated information in the checklist and shared it at the MEval–TZ partners' meeting during the second year.

In Year 3, the activity faced a major roadblock when funding was interrupted. This happened as sustainability planning was accelerating. Activity teams were learning from implementation during the first two years and were developing a practical approach to collecting and monitoring sustainability data and documenting success stories and lessons learned. Similarly, all stakeholders were continuing to track sustainability outcomes. Even though sustainability progress-tracking was not possible during Year 3, the sustainability activity team worked with project leadership to use other resources to update the checklist so that project processes, approaches, and policy changes affecting sustainability outcomes could be better captured by activity teams in coming years.

> "I particularly appreciated the checklist, because it allowed us to think about concrete actions the team could be taking to help ensure the sustainability of our intervention."
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> —Cristina de la Torre, activity lead for support for referral system strengthening

Toward the end of the third year, the team successfully advocated a refocus on sustainability and continued monitoring of the sustainability indicators, which allowed activity leads to demonstrate the long-term impact of intervention successes. The timing (during the second half of the project) provided an opportunity to develop and institute plans for sustainability and transition as the project's end approached.

In Year 4, the sustainability activity team facilitated a two-day workshop to help teams develop transition plans. Each team consulted the sustainability framework as they prioritized and shortlisted activities critical to continued success of sustainability outcomes.

Achievements and Lessons Learned

The project began with a promise to sustain its achievements through deliberate planning; this fostered a sustainable approach to all work plans. Internal and external stakeholders were consulted and their interest, enthusiasm, and cooperation bolstered this activity. The establishment of a common understanding of sustainability, a vision, and expected outcomes early on helped all activity teams to think from a sustainability perspective.

The results that MEval–TZ achieved support the outcomes as envisioned in the sustainability framework, described further in the MEASURE Evaluation publication *Sustainability Planning for MEASURE Evaluation-Tanzania*.[8] For example, the project established proper guidelines and policies for health management information systems with trained staff both in the Ministry of Health in mainland Tanzania and in Zanzibar. The project identified and built the capacity of 40 data use champions to lead data use activities at the subnational level. Similarly, DHIS 2 functions were developed, and a training manual for data use for HIS strengthening at the national level was developed. The project also institutionalized a postgraduate-level course in project management and M&E in health at Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences.

Despite these successes, the actual monitoring of sustainability was less than optimum, owing to interrupted funding midproject. The interruption points to the importance of continued commitment of donors and project teams regarding sustainability objectives and agreed-upon paths to achieve them. Even so, the achievements of this effort, supported by USAID, do support long-term sustainable outcomes.[9] The development of transition plans in Year 4 and their implementation have paved a path forward for all local stakeholders to continue activities for sustained outcomes beyond the project.

[7] The sustainability framework did not include indicators related to project implementation processes, approaches, and policy-level changes that are necessary for sustainability. Therefore, the checklist is more than just a tool to compile and collate indicators. It is itself a process that helps activity teams to reflect on and assess the successes and lessons learned. It was a complementary tool to the sustainability framework.

[8] Available at https://www.measureevaluation.org/resources/publications/tr-18-304/

[9] For more information about the successes and lessons learned, please see https://www.measureevaluation.org/resources/publications/tr-18-304/[3] For details about these processes, read Brinkerhoff, D., & Jacobstein, D. (2015). Systems thinking and institutional performance: Retrospect and prospect on USAID policy and practice. Available at http://www.cedarscenter.com/resources/BrinkerhoffJacobstein_SystemsUSAID_IDG_working_paper_150417.pdf

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