

Monitoring and Evaluation

Discovering and Utilizing Sound Practices

Sound practices are “what works best in a particular context.” They are planning or operational practices or set of actions that are used to demonstrate and analyze what works (or what does not work) and why. Sound practices make a difference; they have a sustainable effect; and they serve as a model for adapting initiatives elsewhere. The sound practices outlined in this document are culled from the experiences of CRS Zimbabwe’s Support to Replicable, Innovative, Village/Community-Level Efforts to support children affected by AIDS (STRIVE) Program over the past two years of program implementation.



Background

AIDS has claimed almost 20 million lives worldwide and an estimated 40 million people are currently living with the illness. In 2001, 12% of sub-Saharan African children were orphans. This number represents 34 million orphaned children, of whom 11 million were orphaned as a result of AIDS. By 2010, the number of AIDS orphans is projected to grow to 20 million (*Children on the Brink*, 2002).

Due to the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS on children, a special emphasis is being placed on how to mitigate the spread of the disease among children and to assist those children who have already been affected. In light of the rapidly expanding numbers of vulnerable children, it is vital that AIDS service programs learn from their own interventions and similar interventions being implemented by other organizations. This process of continuous learning and improvement is vital, due to the constantly evolving nature of both the crisis, and the disease itself. In order to carry out the process effectively, an organization must be able to collect, analyze, and disseminate information quickly and clearly.

Unfortunately, an examination of current HIV/AIDS programs indicates that while different organization’s experiences are being shared, it is in a highly unsystematic manner. Information varies in both content and in method of generation, making it extremely difficult to compare programs and different interventions. Consequently, sound practices are difficult to identify and evidence of project impact tends to be either weak or non-existent. One of the main sources of this problem is the absence of strong Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems.

Monitoring and Evaluating Interventions

Monitoring is a process that systematically and critically observes events related to interventions, thereby making it possible to adapt activities to changing conditions. By utilizing a monitoring process, program managers are able to set performance indicators and targets and then gather

information regularly to check the project’s progress. Based on the information gathered, it becomes possible to make informed decisions and take corrective action if problems emerge. The process then begins anew, as managers collect information to gauge the effectiveness of the corrective action taken. Monitoring includes the following activities:

- Periodic record keeping (Write down which children were served, where, when, how many, in what ways, etc.)
- Reporting (Inform management of results, share findings with colleagues from other organizations, publish results, etc.)
- Storage of data (Create a formal record of the collected information)
- Analysis/Reviews (Is the recorded information accurate? Is there enough of it? What does it indicate? etc.)

Evaluation, on the other hand, is the assessment of a project’s relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, and impact on the target population and beneficiaries. Evaluation draws on data collected during the monitoring process and can be supplemented by additional data from surveys and studies.

Sound Practices for M&E

One of the principal challenges of carrying out effective Monitoring and Evaluation is the costs, both monetary and opportunity, involved. The reality is that it is often impossible for officers and field staff to visit every project site on a regular basis to carry out a full-scale evaluation, especially when projects are serving large amounts of children. “Spot checks,” are a sound practice that can help to overcome this obstacle. Spot checks consist of randomly selecting a few sites and conducting surprise monitoring visits. Although spot checks are not a means to collect complete data, they can often uncover certain trends about how completely records are being kept, the effectiveness of the beneficiary selection process, and the actual number of children being served at a certain site.

Working with children adds an additional complication to the M&E process: getting children to sit still long enough for monitors to collect accurate information. “Station days” are a sound practice that actually makes data collection enjoyable for the children involved. During the station day, school aged children are brought to a specified location where they participate in different stations that either collect or distribute information. For example, children might rotate from height/weight measurements, to playing an HIV prevention game, to answering survey questions on PSS, and then finish by attending a presentation on personal hygiene where they are given a bar of soap. By combining M&E with participatory activities for the children, station days have proven to be an effective means of collecting data in a non-“extractive” and participatory manner, in both urban and rural areas.

