Operations Research:
Discovering and Utilizing Sound Practices

Sound practices are "what works best in a particular context." They are planning or operational practices or sets 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.

1. Research question identification and explanation (What do we want to know? What is happening? Why is it happening? Who is being affected?)
2. Strategy selection (There are many potential approaches to the issue: which is the best?)
3. Strategy testing and evaluation (How well does our response address the issue? Should we continue implementing our response or try a new one?)
4. Information dissemination (How can we best share our successes and failures with others?)
5. Information utilization (How can we use the lessons learned to better select and design future initiatives?)

OR is about more than simply seeking practical solutions to the challenges faced by children. While OR does indeed seek such solutions, it also takes the essential next step of explaining *why* a particular way of doing things is working or not, and *how* to most effectively share these conclusions with other groups dealing with similar problems.

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 essential because of the constantly evolving nature of the crisis and the disease itself. In order to carry out this process effectively, an organization must be able to collect, analyze, and disseminate information quickly and clearly.

An examination of current HIV/AIDS programs indicates that while experiences are being shared, it is in an unsystematic manner. Information varies in both content and in method of generation, making it extremely difficult to compare programs and different interventions. Consequently, best practices are difficult to identify and evidence of project impact tends to be either weak or non-existent. Along with the absence of strong Monitoring and Evaluation systems, one of the principal causes of this problem is the virtual non-existence of Operations Research (OR).

Conducting Operations Research

Operations Research takes scientific, systematic methods and applies them to decision making. It is a problem-solving tool that focuses on the day-to-day operations of working with children. In practical terms, OR is a continuous process with five basic steps:

Sound Practices for Operations Research

Because OR is concerned with the "how" and the "why" of success and failure, it must always look beyond surface details. Consider the fact that in many child-centered projects, children often benefit from more than one activity for concurrent periods of time. As a result, children are often double counted. For example, if 500 children receive school fees, 200 children participate in kids clubs, and 150 children's families receive food from community gardens, many project managers would simply add up the numbers and determine that a total of 850 children have been served.

However, this number would be inaccurate if, of the 500 children receiving school fees, 175 also participate in kids clubs, of the 200 children in kids clubs, 175 also receive school fees, and the 150 children benefiting from community gardens, all 150 also receive school fees.

After eliminating double counting it emerges that the total number of *different* children reached is 525, much less than the 850 initially indicated. In an environment where there is a push for results to reach as many children as possible, it might be assumed that 850 is the better number for a project to report. However, eliminating double counting is a sound practice, not only because over-reporting beneficiaries is dishonest and unethical, but also because a holistic approach to serving children requires that programs be responsive to a range of children's needs. A project's ability to provide relevant services to children is just as, if not more, important as how many children it is able to serve. 525 may be a lower number, but it more accurately describes the breadth of service offered to children.