The SEEP NETWORK

Toward a Complete Progress Tracking System

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In doing development work that depends in any way on public subsidy, even if only to get started, we bear a special burden to make the case that what we do day in and day out actually moves some segment of humanity toward our lofty goals. Implicit in the work of every one of our organizations is at least one hypothesis: if we do *this* for *these* people, then we will move farther down the road to *this* goal. We cannot expect our donors to accept our hypotheses on faith. We have to make a rational case for the plausibility of each hypothesis we peddle, and we have to bolster our case with some sort of evidence.

Progress Tracking

At Freedom from Hunger, our general hypothesis is that building the self-help capacity of chronically hungry families leads them to no longer being chronically hungry. About 15 years ago, we proposed a new, untested hypothesis:
If we offer a group of women from food insecure families the opportunity to take, invest and repay cash loans, save money, and participate in good
quality adult education for better health, nutrition and very basic business management, we should see improvements in household food security and child nutrition. And, if we build the capacity of local organizations to provide this Credit with Education service, we should see large-scale, long-term delivery of the services that produce this change.

This is a theory of change, connecting *inputs* to *outputs* to *outcomes* to *impacts.* For example, inputs such as partnerships, staff, training, and vehicles lead to loans, education, and large-scale engagement with poor women. These outputs enable increased income, assets and knowledge, empowerment, adoption of new practices (outcomes directly attributable, in part, to the outputs). Over time these outcomes create the necessary conditions for improved food security through the year, capacity to cope with unexpected economic shocks to the household, and better child nutrition and family health. All these are impacts determined and influenced by many factors other than the outcomes *Credit with Education* can produce.

As plausible as our hypothesis was 15 years ago, it rested on some assumptions that were not fully accepted by public health nutritionists, microeconomists, or food security specialists. It required testing to be credible to donors that would turn to such experts for advice. We could not find a research organization interested in the issue. So we hired a researcher (who collaborated with professors and others at the University of California, Davis) and performed our own formal, rigorous impact research in Ghana[1] and Bolivia,[2] two of our (then) five country programs, which we felt represented the full range of variation in *Credit with Education* programs. The findings of these two studies validated our hypothesis by providing statistically significant evidence that participation in a *Credit with Education* scheme led to the desired outcomes and even the anticipated impacts. We also did smaller, less rigorous studies that verified change in similar directions as in the formal, rigorous studies.

Good cause-effect impact research is needed to build confidence in a development design innovation among skeptical donors, but it would be unnecessary and wasteful to try proving the overall hypothesis every time we replicate *Credit with Education.* Still, we have to verify that implementation is done correctly every time (required inputs generate necessary outputs) and to provide indicative evidence that desired outcomes and impacts are occurring (without rising to the level of proof of causality, as in rigorous cause-effect research). These are functions that have to be *embedded in routine operations,* done by implementing staff.

However, they have to involve only very simple data collection regarding just a few key, meaningful indicators, requiring reasonably easy analysis and interpretation and leading straight to decision-makers in the implementing institution.

To distinguish it from formal cause-effect research, Freedom from Hunger calls this embedded system "progress tracking." The purpose of progress tracking is not to prove the validity of our theory of change, but to *improve* the chances of our moving through the chain of cause and effect, from inputs to impacts. Without continual or frequent feedback from a complete progress tracking system, we are likely to veer off onto the wrong route, never reach our destination, and maybe even do more harm than good.

At this point "progress tracking" is a concept rather than a system we can point to; it manifests differently in every implementing organization. "Management Information System" (MIS) might be considered a synonym, except that MIS more narrowly connotes quantitative data, forms and computers. Progress tracking embraces all collection and *use* of information by a program to monitor progress toward program objectives (financial, institutional and social). The progress tracking systems we know have gaps, particularly in the area of social performance monitor-

ing and feedback to operational decisions. We have developed and tested some tools/methods to fill these gaps, but these tools have not been widely adopted or systematically situated in the current progress tracking systems (MIS plus) of our partners, and the partners who have adopted these tools have done so in very different ways. Achieving uniformity of the system across all or even most partners is an elusive, perhaps illusory goal. Still, we need a generic model system that partners can customize for their particular needs, rather than start from scratch in every case.

A necessary condition to implement a complete progress tracking system is that the service-delivering institution, in particular its senior management, has a client service orientation. At the same time, however, progress tracking can also help promote a client service orientation by providing valid information to foster keener awareness of how clients perceive and react to the services and thereby inform action to improve services.

The remainder of this Progress Note is devoted to experience to date with development of some of the missing progress tracking components with *Credit with Education* providers in Uganda (FOCCAS), Bolivia (CRECER), and the Philippines (CARD). It is a work in progress.

[1] MkNelly, Barbara and Christopher Dunford. 1998. Impact of Credit with Education on Mothers' and Their Young Children's Nutrition: Lower Pra Rural Bank Credit with Education Program in Ghana. Research Paper No. 4. Davis, CA: Freedom from Hunger (www.ffhtechnical.org).

[2] MkNelly, Barbara and Christopher Dunford. 1999. Impact of Credit with Education on Mothers and Their Young Children's Nutrition: CRECER Credit with Education Program in Bolivia. Research Paper No. 5. Davis, CA: Freedom from Hunger (www.ffhtechnical.org).

The Embedding Process

The challenge for a well-established *Credit with Education* practitioner is to build on existing but incomplete and already burdensome collection and flow of information to create a coherent, comprehensive, and low-cost progress tracking system.

In each case, the work begins with a participatory workshop of staff from various levels of the institution to define their unmet informational needs. While other stakeholders—donors, board of directors, partners, and clients—have information needs and must be consulted at some point, the principal users are always staff of the implementing organization itself. The workshop involves a thorough assessment of the existing system to identify gaps in the information collection and flow and also to discover existing monitoring activities that are not contributing to action and could therefore be discontinued.

The next step is to create or adapt specific methods (tools) that staff can use to fill the gaps. There is already much valuable information informally "collected" by staff at all levels but not captured for feedback and decision making within the organization; for example, regular service contacts between staff and clients, regular meetings of staff with supervisors, occasional senior management visits to observe field operations and talk to clients, etc. These are opportunities for information collection and exchange that can be enhanced by being made more explicit and systematic. But to fill other gaps new informa-

tion collection and analysis methods and tools may be needed.

The operating principle underlying any elaboration of the progress tracking system is that for every information collection/reporting task added to the workload of staff, some other task must be removed. Staff are already fully loaded; this is a "zero-sum game." The expensive alternative is to add new staff dedicated to collecting and analyzing information from clients and other sources. Such a special "research" unit can be very valuable. But if not well-conceived, managed and integrated within the organization, this alternative is likely to create a parallel information flow that by-passes the operational staff, especially at the level of staff who come in regular contact with clients (the frontline "face" of the organization). The likely result is diminished opportunity for feedback to improve operations and stay on track toward intended impacts.

Examples Of New Progress Tracking Tools

This section briefly reviews three tools designed to fill gaps in the pre-existing progress tracking systems of FOCCAS Uganda, CRECER (Bolivia), and/or CARD (the Philippines):

1. **observational checklists** to ensure linkage of required inputs to necessary outputs,
2. **pre-and-post mini surveys** to ensure linkage of outputs to desired outcomes, and
3. **participatory learning for action (PLA)** to assess in more open-ended fashion client response to the outputs.

Each of the three tools has wide-

spread applicability and lends itself to cost-effective implementation. The tools were designed to be used by field staff during regularly scheduled field visits, rather than require specialist staff doing special studies. They can also be used in special studies, however, and specialized training can be helpful for using them more effectively or in more sophisticated ways. This is especially the case for PLA.

Implementation of these new progress tracking tools has led to two types of institutional action: specific *programmatic decisions* taken to improve service/product performance and *institutional strengthening* manifest in the organization's ability to use information and promote a culture of learning, service quality and responsiveness to client demand. According to senior staff at all three partners, client demand, retention and satisfaction with both financial and educational services have improved as a result of the staff using these new tools.

Observational Checklists

Observational checklists are a good example of a tool that is simple, yet very useful. The checklists itemize the critical steps for tasks that are repeated often and are central to program success, such as field agent performance at the regular meetings of credit groups. They use a simple "yes/no" format lending itself to immediate analysis so that supervisors can give on-the-spot feedback to field agents. Simple scoring can also be done so that the information can be incorporated into existing performance or incentive systems. Observational checklists are used on an ongo-

ing basis (e.g., each field agent is assessed once per quarter) so as to provide individual level feedback and identify training needs for staff.

The items in the draft observational checklist were vetted with all field staff in a participatory half-day session. Use of the checklist is also reinforced during field agent trainings to introduce new education topics. Additional half-day training was also provided specifically for branch managers in how to use the checklist. FOCCAS Uganda branch managers were also observed twice in the field as they used the checklist to give feedback to a field agent following an actual group meeting/learning session. The quality of service delivery is essential to program performance and impacts, which makes supervisory tools such as an observational checklist broadly useful.

The major challenge addressed in the development of this approach has been to ensure that it is used to motivate via feedback and not simply monitor field agent performance. Examples of strategies used to meet this challenge include: 1) active involvement of field agents in development and pre-testing of checklist, 2) training in how to give and receive feedback, and 3) incorporation of checklists into training to promote their use as a job aid.

Pre-and-Post Mini Surveys

We developed pre-and-post mini surveys to assess client knowledge and practice before and after education in specific health and business management topics, but this survey approach is in concept applicable to change in income, assets and other economic variables as well. The surveys are conducted with small samples of clients (typically 19 per branch) using the "lot quality assurance sampling" (LQAS) approach. Use of LQAS greatly reduces the size of the sample needed to draw valid conclusions about a population of clients. However, LQAS depends on determining in advance the minimum acceptable percentage of "correct" answers given by the clients interviewed (responses are coded to indicate whether the "correct" response is given). For example, the program manager may decide that good-quality malaria education should result in at least 80% of clients knowing that the best way to prevent malaria in children under five is to have them sleep under an insecticide-treated bed net. Using LQAS tables, the number of correct responses indicates whether the "lot" (in this case, the branch) has met the pre-determined target and identifies relatively low and high performing branches. In the bed net example, a result less than 80% in a branch would trigger a more careful investigation of the quality of malaria education offered to clients of that branch (using the observation checklist approach, perhaps).

Selected staff of CRECER and CARD participated in extensive training in LQAS methods for 3 days to one week. Field agents participated in a two-day training that focused on the specific mini survey and basics of LQAS with one additional day to tally and analyze the results. To date, mini surveys have focused on either a single topic, with the pre-and post-rounds conducted over a relatively short six-

month period (CRECER), or on multiple topics with plans to assess post-education after approximately 2 years time (CARD). At CARD, results were also used to compare client knowledge and practice in branches offering education compared to branches not offering education.

The major challenge with the mini surveys, as with each tool, has been to limit the burden it places on staff time and resources while maximizing the use of the information they generate. Data collection using mini surveys requires little additional work since the surveys are short (8–12 questions), and each field agent conducts only 1-4 surveys during his/her regularly scheduled client meetings. With LQAS, analysis is also simple, since results can be hand-tallied and compared to prepared LQAS tables. Field agents tally the results at interactive sessions during which time they also identify low-performing branches and indicators and set targets for further action. This approach allows for rapid data analysis, but more important, it can motivate action by engaging staff in discussion of the results.

Participatory Learning for Action

PLA discussions with groups of clients explore in greater depth their wants and needs, obtain feedback on the existing service package, and determine whether the program is achieving, from the clients' perspective, intended outcomes and impacts. These discussions typically include a visual element, such as the creation of a calendar or a ranking/rating exercise, to stimulate participant discussion and analysis.

Field agents each facilitate a common PLA tool with one of their groups in place of the "learning session" at a regularly scheduled meeting. The PLA discussions are organized once or twice a year to address a particular question or issue identified by managers and field staff together.

The up front investment in staff training in PLA has averaged one week, including practical field practice in facilitating various PLA tools and analyzing their results. After this more intensive introduction and practice, each new PLA tool required field testing with subgroups of field agents and orientation training of about one day for all field agents who would use it.

While PLA can provide extremely valuable information, it presents certain challenges. It requires good facilitation skills, produces a tremendous wealth of detailed information, and can create unrealistic expectations for change on the part of staff and clients who participate. Strategies to address these challenges included careful staff training and field practice of PLA techniques and broad staff participation in summarizing and reacting to the results through interactive working meetings, beginning with frontline staff.

FOCCAS in particular has used PLA. Each level of the organization considered and reacted to the information generated and together developed immediate, medium- and long-term action plans. For more fundamental adaptations, FOCCAS staff recognized the need to consider the institutional implications in terms of costs, revenues, and risks of the various adaptations or new product ideas that emerged. FOCCAS established staff committees for study and recommendation of possible product and process changes. Communication with clients about the institutional response to their ideas for change has been achieved through special workshops organized with management committees of the client groups.

Filling Other Gaps

These three examples of progress tracking tools address some major identified gaps in existing progress tracking systems but not all. Quantitative monitoring of client-level impact is also very important. We have been working with CARD, CRECER, and a couple of West African partners to adapt a food security scaling method to classify client households in terms of their recent "food security." Household food security is a fundamental indicator of client welfare and has been shown by our formal impact research studies to be highly sensitive to participation in good quality *Credit with Education* services. Therefore, we hope to use this adapted food security scale to track the impact of the program on client households as they participate over time. The score on the scale can be used to identify very poor (food insecure) households and thereby to track movement into and out of deep poverty. This food security scaling method and its potential use for impact monitoring will be the subject of another Progress Note.
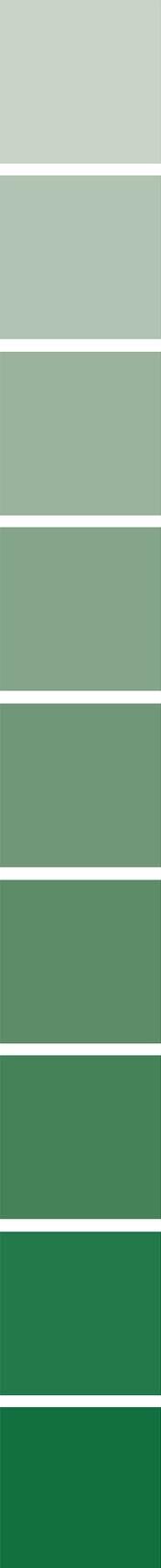
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