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Rural WASH Project in Zimbabwe: monitoring and feedback mechanism for accelerating progress

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A large scale Rural WASH Project is being implemented in 33 districts of Zimbabwe since June 2012. Failure of formal and routine monitoring mechanism during the initial phase of implementation led to development of innovative, rigorous but a very simple monitoring, feedback and reporting mechanism. This was built and integrated into the routine monitoring and reporting system of the implementing partners without creating additional burden. This mechanism proved to be extremely successful in tracking the progress at logframe/national, provincial/regional, implementing partner, district and indicator level on monthly basis. The mechanism was linked to development of corrective action plans at various levels aimed at accelerating progress. Each month a comprehensive graphical report is prepared and shared at national, provincial, and district levels with all stakeholders including donors. The overall progress on the project so far is well on track which was substantially behind before initiation of this monitoring mechanism.

Background

Further to cholera outbreak in 2008-2009 in Zimbabwe, a four-year major project was initiated in rural areas of Zimbabwe in June 2012 under the name of 'Rural WASH Project (RWP)' with total funding of USD 62 million provided by the UK Government (about USD 52 million to cover 30 districts), Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (about USD 6 million to cover 3 districts) and UNICEF (USD 4 million). This project is being implemented in 33 out of the 60 Rural Districts in the 5 selected provinces since June 2012 and will end in June 2016. The Rural WASH Project includes four major thematic areas/components of (i) Rehabilitation and New WASH Infrastructure, (ii) Demand-led Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion, (iii) Public- Private Partnership for operation and maintenance, and (iv) WASH Sector Governance. The Rural WASH Project aims at delivering the following major results by the end of the project period (Ahmad et al., 2016a; Ahmad et al., 2016b; Government of Zimbabwe and UNICEF, 2012):

1. Provision of access to improved sources of drinking water to 1,726,000 people in 33 districts through construction of 1,660 B' Type Bush Pump equipped new boreholes and repair/rehabilitation of 8,200 water points including 33 piped water schemes;
2. Provision of sanitation services to 589,760 people through supporting communities for construction of household latrines and elimination of open defaecation;
3. Reaching 1,272,000 people with hygiene promotion messages to facilitate adoption of healthier behaviour especially handwashing with soap at critical times, and use of sanitation facilities;
4. Provision of sanitation and handwashing facilities in 1,660 schools;
5. Strengthening the capacity of community based structures for O&M; districts and provinces for monitoring, supervision and sustainable delivery of WASH services; and
6. Establishment of Rural WASH Information Management System (RWIMS) in the 33 targeted districts.

Considering the lessons learned during the first year of implementation, large scale nature of the project, and complex and challenging operating environment, a robust but simple monitoring and feedback mechanism was developed and operationalized to track the progress at various levels. The experience has

been dramatic extremely successful in accelerating the progress. This paper attempts to share the experience in the implementation of the monitoring and feedback mechanism in terms of methodology and processes adopted, analysis of results achieved, effectiveness, and application of the monitoring results for controlling financial risk associated with utilization of funds with partial delivery of planned results.

Rationale for comprehensive monitoring and feedback mechanism

In the initial phase (i.e., June 2012 to March 2014), the project relied on routine quarterly narrative reports which were obligatory from the 10 implementing partners (IPs) under Project Cooperation Agreements (PCAs). However, this arrangement proved to be ineffective because (i) the gap between identifying the issue through quarterly reports and proposing corrective action was too long (i.e., 4 months), (ii) the narrative reports from implementing partners were not compatible for making overall assessment at project level, (iii) narrative reports proved to be difficult to quantify the progress at different levels i.e., at indicator, district, regional/IP and national levels. In addition to these factors, there was poor linkage between progress achieved and disbursement of funds to the IPs and thus there was lack of clear accountability for timely delivery of planned results with utilization of funds. Due to large scale nature of the Rural WASH Project in term of funding (over USD 62 million) and geographic scope (33 of the 60 districts), there was high likelihood of missing milestones and targets if not monitored effectively and efficiently. This led to the development of innovative monitoring, reporting and feedback mechanism which proved extremely effective in tracking and accelerating the progress.

Methodology and processes

Development of templates

A draft template was developed in MS Excel covering various indicators at activity, output and outcome levels to capture data from 33 targeted districts under the Rural WASH Project. The indicators were selected based on the milestones and targets as per logframe agreed with donors, and targets agreed with the implementing partners under the Project Cooperation Agreement (PCAs). Table 1 below shows description of major indicators being used for monitoring and reporting on monthly basis.

S.No.	Description of indicators	S.No.	Description of indicators
1	Number of new boreholes drilled and water points repaired/rehabilitated.	4	Number of school provided with sanitation and hygiene facilities
2	Number of villages achieved open defaecation free status and number of latrines constructed	5	Number of village pump mechanics, latrine builders, school health teachers, and sanitation and hygiene facilitators capacitated.
3	Number of water point committees, community health clubs, sanitation action groups, school development committees established and trained.	6	Number of people benefited from improved sources of drinking water, sanitation services and hygiene promotion

The draft template was then finalized based on through consultation with all stakeholders and with full endorsement of the government. Efforts were made to eliminate the need of collecting narrative part except under optional “remark column” for clarification if needed only. This was to ensure simplicity and ease of reporting by limiting it to updating the number for achievement against the fixed targets. The major thrust of the template was to make it a simple and doable task for the implementing partners without adding much to the existing workload. MS Excel was used to make the system sustainable by deliberately eliminating the need of specialised software/database package which require specific technical expertise and of course additional resources.

Monitoring mechanism and data flow

The project is being implemented through government structures. District and sub-district (ward) level government officials are responsible for implementation, supervision and monitoring of the project while 8

implementing partners (IPs i.e., I/NGOs) are responsible for providing overall coordination, technical support, monitoring of the project in the districts. Each IP is responsible for 3 to 6 districts in a given geographic region/provinces with 1-2 staff based in each of the district. The national government through the National Coordination Unit (a secretariat of the National Action Committee on WASH) provide required day to day support for the implementation of the project in the 33 districts through government mechanisms established at provincial level (Provincial Water Supply and Sanitation Sub-Committees-PWSSCs), and district level (District Water Supply and Sanitation Sub-Committees-DWSSC) (Ahmad et al., 2016a). The process of monitoring and data flow is summarized as below:

1. Monitoring, and collection of data at village/ward level by the extension workers of the Ministry of Health on Sanitation and Hygiene component and Rural Development Councils (RDCs) on water supply component. RDCs are government agency at district level responsible for Rural WASH amongst others development works with guidance and support from the DWSSCs.
2. Verification and compilation of monitoring data at district level by DWSSCs with support from the IPs (please also note that IP (I/NGO) is also formal member of the DWSSC which is made up with representation from all relevant ministries including health, education, social welfare etc.).
3. IPs submit the completed reporting template on monthly basis to UNICEF country office. The deadline for submission of the report is every 5th of the month for the previous month. The IPs are not allowed to change the template except updating the data. IPs are not allowed to change the template, the row and column numbers to remain unchanged. This is to facilitate compilation of report at national level.
4. UNICEF thoroughly analyse the data for each of the indicators and monthly report is produced and shared with stakeholders with proposed actions. The next section describe the level of analysis.
5. During the joint monitoring missions by national team (government and UNICEF) and provincial team, data reported by the district are verified.

Data analysis and reporting

The updated monthly master sheet provides basis for detailed analysis of progress including trend analysis, producing graphical and tabular information, and finally preparing a detailed monthly report. The analysis include (i) trend analysis of overall progress at the project/national level and progress on each log frame indicator, (ii) trend of overall progress at Implementing Partner (IP) level giving trend of monthly incremental progress (iii) trend of progress on individual indicators at IP level, (iv) trend of overall progress at district level, (v) progress on each individual indicator at district level and (vi) financial risk analysis based on progress amongst others. Based on the analysis monthly graphical status report is prepared with minimum narrative part i.e., only one page summary at the beginning of the report while the rest are graphical and tabular formats. At the end of the report, summary of proposed actions is provided in tabular format highlighting critical areas behind targets specific to districts and IPs and proposed action to accelerate progress. The report also include a one page DASHBOARD which give summary of progress for 14 critical indicators (% achieved) for all the 33 districts using traffic signal colours with red showing substantially behind the target requiring extraordinary remedial action, yellow showing those moderately behind the target requiring urgent action, and green reflecting progress is on track or completed requiring sustaining the current level of efforts. The report is shared regularly on monthly basis at national, provincial and district level with all relevant ministries, IPs and donors. Below section will provide flavour of the above analysis to provide concrete examples to the readers.

Tracking progress

The progress on the Rural WASH Project is tracked at various levels from project level to each indicator level, and from national level to district level to cater for the need of various stakeholders at national, provincial, district and level including donors as mentioned in earlier section. Examples of tracking at various level are presented in below sub-sections.

Tracking overall progress

Overall progress at project/national level is measured considering weighted average of progress achieved on individual indicators under various outputs and plotted against the respective milestone for the month being reported. Trend line of projected progress is also plotted graphically to see if the planned target is achievable with the current rate of progress. This type of graph provides a quick snapshot of how the project is performing overtime and whether it is likely to achieve the planned result at the end of the project. It helps

the senior management/officials to know exactly where the project stands without going into detail of project activities.

Tracking progress at logframe level

The progress for logframe indicators is presented in a tabular form with respect to corresponding logframe milestone for the month being reported and against project end targets. Based on financial weights applied to the respective indicators, output level progress is determined while overall progress is computed by applying logframe impact factors to each of the outputs. This level of analysis is extremely helpful for senior project managers who are accountable to the organization to deliver what has been committed with donors. Donors also use this specific information to see the progress specific to what has been agreed in the funding proposal and also report to their respective government on how the funds are being used with regards to the commitments. In addition, the progress on each of the indicator is tracked over time on monthly basis with future projection to see whether the end line target could be achieved with current level of progress and what could be done to accelerate the progress.

Tracking progress at implementing partner level

The overall progress achieved by each of the implementing partners specific to the districts they are operating (sub-national/regional level) is tracked on monthly basis due to three major reasons-(i) to compare progress achieved in different regions, (ii) to encourage IPs to accelerate progress in their respective districts by comparing the level of progress achieved by other IPs, and (iii) to monitor the progress on the individual PCAs and linking the progress with funds disbursed to IPs. The last one serves a financial control to keep the difference between % of fund disbursed and % progress achieved. Figure 1 shows example of tracking overall progress at IP/sub-national level. This identifies which IP is doing very well and which IP is behind in terms of progress and requiring additional support. In addition to overall progress at IP level, progress is also measured for each of the indicator and it is tracked over time. This helps identify IPs who consistently fails to make significant improvement over the last few months and thus requiring serious bilateral discussion with the higher management to bring progress on track.

Tracking progress at district level

Overall progress at district level is measured by taking average of all indicators and it is expressed in terms of percent progress achieved against the project end line targets. The progress for all the 33 districts is plotted graphically to provide glimpse of overall progress across the targeted districts and underscore districts not making incremental monthly progress over time and thus raises alarm for urgent assessment and corrective action. In addition, progress is also assessed at each indicator level and compared across the districts. In order to facilitate quick review of progress, progress for 14 major indicators in terms of percent achievement is also presented for 33 districts in the form of one-page Dashboard with colour coding based on traffic light pattern i.e., red, yellow and green as explained in other earlier sections. This Dashboard not only helps the district to come up with corrective action plan but also guides provincial and national team to prioritize their support to districts through monitoring and support missions. IPs use this Dashboard on monthly basis during the review meeting at district level to fast track the progress for areas lagging behind.

Major uses of the monitoring status report

As mentioned earlier the monthly status report is shared with all stakeholders and follow up actions are undertaken (e.g., field monitoring missions, meeting with the implementing partners) to address issues identified in the report. The major uses of the report includes the following:

1. Monthly review of progress especially based on one page Dashboard by the districts/IPs leading to corrective action plans especially for areas lagging behind the planned targets.
2. Formal and informal alerts provided to IPs on poor progress and request for fast tracking the progress.
3. Extensive used by national and provincial during field monitoring mission to the districts.
4. Used during reviews (monthly, quarterly, mid-year and annual) for development of improvement plans
5. Use as a financial control to mitigate risks i.e., % total allocated fund disbursed to partners is linked to corresponding % progress achieved. No further funds released if the gap is above 10%.
6. Used updating donors on monthly basis and also provides inputs for various sector and donor reports.

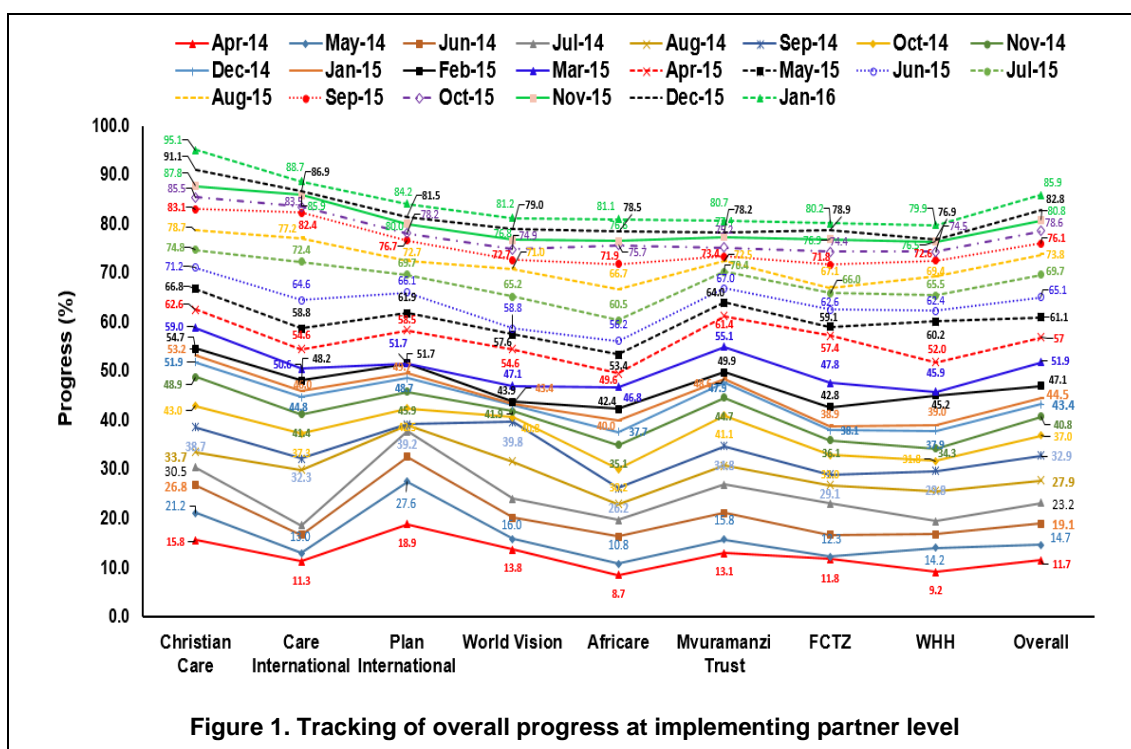


Figure 1. Tracking of overall progress at implementing partner level

Lessons learned and way forward

Effective and transparent monitoring, reporting and feedback mechanism on regular basis is extremely useful when implementing large scale project. It contributes to acceleration of progress by timely identifying and addressing bottlenecks before it gets too late and creating accountability. This was demonstrated when this new tracking, monitoring and feedback mechanism for measuring and reporting results was introduced in April 2014. At that period of time the project has achieved an overall progress of 11.7% since its inception in June 2012 (after 22 months). With introduction of this rigorous and accountable mechanism, implementing partners undertook various measures to accelerate the progress and within three months (i.e., by July 2014), the progress was doubled i.e., increased from 11.7% to 23.2%. Implementing partners thoroughly review the monthly progress update (especially the DASHBOARD) during their monthly review meeting and come up with action plan to address bottlenecks. This action plan is reviewed and adjusted on regular basis based on feedback from the monthly progress update. In addition, team from the national and provincial government make use of the report during field monitoring missions to the districts and provide required technical support to accelerate the progress. Higher management of the implementing partners (both government and civil societies) makes this report basis for discussion with their field team to review the progress on the project. In addition comparison progress across various districts and implementing partners encourages positive competition for achieving results and also increase pressure on those performing below minimum acceptable level. Finally, linking disbursement of funds to corresponding progress inculcates result based performance approach and value for money.

Sharing an informal comprehensive status report on monthly basis covering various aspect of project with donors reduced the need of donors to rely on formal six-monthly and annual donor reports. Sharing an informal comprehensive graphical status report with donors on monthly basis resulted in donors' confidence on the project implementation.

Another lesson that was learned was that making monitoring system simple, practical and built into the ongoing mechanism is a key factor for its success as it is not considered to be additional burden and liability on the implementing partners as it is built into the routine implementation mechanism systematically. The way forward is to sustain the initiative beyond the Rural WASH Project and rolling it up to all the districts in the country.

Conclusions

Under the Rural WASH Project, which is a very large scale project (with over 62 million dollars funding covering 33 of 60 districts of the country), a successful tracking, monitoring, and feedback mechanism was successfully operationalized. The mechanism resulted into a comprehensive monthly reporting on over 20 indicators at activity, output and outcome levels leading to development and implementation of corrective action plan. The overall progress on the Rural WASH Project is on track with over 90% achievement level by end of February 2016 (Government of Zimbabwe and UNICEF, 2016). Availability of the monitoring report facilitated implementing partners to accelerate the progress especially on areas lacking behind and it also contributed to critical decision making by higher management. The report also serves as a simple tool to mitigate financial risk by systematically linking disbursement of funds to the implementing partners with corresponding progress achieved.

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Note

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the government/organizations they work for.

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