Learning Agenda

The mandate for MEASURE Evaluation, funded by USAID, is to work globally to strengthen capacity in low-resource countries to gather, analyze, and use data in robust health information systems (HIS) for decision making to achieve better health outcomes.

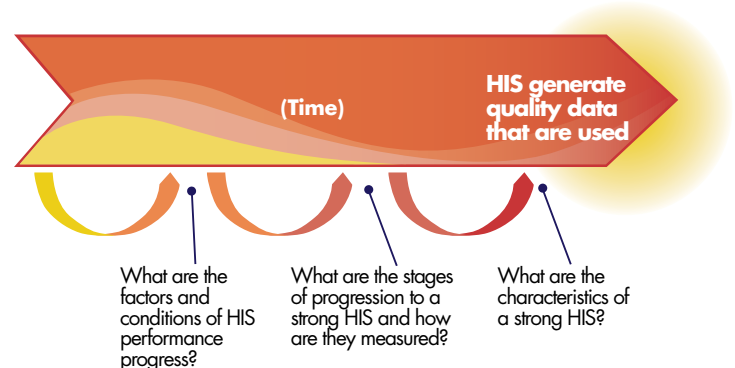USAID has defined four results this effort should achieve:

- Strengthened collection, analysis, and use of routine health data;
- Improved country-level capacity to manage health information systems;
- Methods, tools, and approaches improved and applied to address health information challenges and gaps;
- Increased capacity for rigorous evaluation.

At the end of five years, we are to demonstrate how to measure key HIS concepts and functions; the progression of improved HIS functioning in countries; and strategies for and drivers of change in health information systems. Health information systems are crucial to achieving better health and are a key information source about the overall progress in a country's development. HIS are the backbone of health systems because they provide essential information to enable all players, from policy makers to health providers, to make the right choices for government budgeting on health, health workforce needs, and services that should be provided to citizens.

MEASURE Evaluation and USAID have defined a project monitoring plan (PMP) with indicators and targets to measure countries' achievement toward these results; but there is a level above such granular measurement that also will greatly inform this effort. We call it the Learning Agenda. The Learning Agenda

is a systematic way, sustained throughout the project, of learning what works to strengthen HIS, to build evidence about best practices that countries can replicate to strengthen HIS, and to build evidence about how a stronger HIS can enhance health and save lives. In this process, it will be essential to work with international development partners and country stakeholders also interested in this question. We will seek ways to engage many actors in the Learning Agenda as it progresses – to learn from their experience and to share our own insights.

These lessons learned over the next five years (Phase IV of the project) will help MEASURE Evaluation add to the global evidence base on creating stronger HIS. Just as important, the Learning Agenda process will be dynamic, helping MEASURE Evaluation learn over time, enabling us to refine strategies and activities during the project, so there is a learning cascade we can apply to our work and disseminate to others as insights are gained and discoveries made. Ultimately, the Learning Agenda also should help USAID, MEASURE Evaluation, and other stakeholders understand what systems, policies, and programs contribute most effectively to key health outcome goals, such as achieving an AIDS-free generation and ending preventable child and maternal deaths.

(Time)

HIS generate quality data that are used

What are the factors and conditions of HIS performance progress?

What are the stages of progression to a strong HIS and how are they measured?

What are the characteristics of a strong HIS?

As we embark on this effort, we have defined broad questions to help us develop a theoretical framework to understand what a high-performing health information system looks like:

- What are the factors and conditions of HIS performance progress? How should we measure key HIS concepts and functions?

- What are the stages of progression to a strong HIS? What comes first, typically? Or is there a typical pattern of progression?
- What are the characteristics of a strong HIS? What seem to be the drivers of HIS improvement and what strategies do those drivers suggest?

In Year 1 of the project, we are working to identify key indicators of HIS performance and will use that information to gather data on HIS performance in countries via a web-based repository. The information in the repository will be updated over the course of the project, and some indicators will be sensitive enough to show change over time.

Throughout the course of the project, we will review and document HIS strengthening activities resulting from our own activities and those found in reviews of available literature, frameworks, measures, and HIS assessment results external to the project. We will synthesize this information and communicate how country HIS have changed over time, to what extent they have improved, and the critical assumptions and conditions driving this change and their impact.

As an HIS strengthening project, we have an obligation to generate evidence of how these investments are positively affecting health systems and health outcomes. We also will be conducting rigorous research on HIS interventions to contribute to filling evidence gaps. For example, we want to find out how improved health information systems lead to stronger overall health systems and, in turn, in what ways that may result in better health outcomes. And, we want to discover what kinds of interventions actually improve HIS: Can we show evidence of what works and what does not work?

As other questions arise even as answers emerge, our iterative project design will assist us in capturing new information:

- Our strategy is based on a summary of what we currently know about HIS strengthening, underpinned by a theory of change that considers all known factors that may either help or hinder positive change in HIS.
- We will continue to articulate a theory of change describing how these factors and emerging ones relate to each other and where the project can act to influence change.
- We will refine result area goals, project targets, and our Learning Agenda questions, methods, and data sources, always taking into account how to leverage knowledge and work being done outside the project to strengthen HIS.

For more information on MEASURE Evaluation's work on health information systems strengthening see http://www.cpc.unc.edu/measure/our-work/health-information-systems.