

Madagascar Community-Based Integrated Health Program (CBIHP), locally known as MAHEFA, was a five-year (2011-2016), USAID-funded community health program that took place across six remote regions in north and north-west Madagascar (Menabe, SAVA, DIANA, Sofia, Melaky, and Boeny). The program was implemented by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), with sub-recipients Transaid and The Manoff Group, and was carried out in close collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, and the Ministry of Youth and Sport. Over the course of the program, a total of 6,052 community health volunteers (CHVs) were trained, equipped, and supervised to provide basic health services in the areas of maternal, newborn, and child health; family planning and reproductive health, including sexually transmitted infections; water, sanitation, and hygiene; nutrition; and malaria treatment and prevention at the community level. The CHVs were selected by their own communities, supervised by heads of basic health centers, and provided services based on their scope of work as outlined in the National Community Health Policy. Their work and the work of other community actors involved with the MAHEFA program was entirely on a voluntary basis.

This brief is included in a series of fifteen MAHEFA technical briefs that share and highlight selected strategic approaches, innovations, results, and lessons learned from the program. Technical brief topics include *Behavior Change Empowerment, Radio Listening Groups, Community Score Card Approach, Chlorhexidine 7.1%/ Misoprostol, Champion Communes Approach, Community Health Volunteer Mobility, Emergency Transport Systems, Malaria, Community Health Volunteer Motivation, Family Planning & Youth, WASH, eBox, Community Health Financing Scheme, Information Systems for Community Health, and NGO Capacity Building.*

Background

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play important roles in communities in which they exist. They raise local awareness on a variety of social and environmental matters, encourage civic participation, enable individuals to be agents of change, and foster sustainability. In Madagascar, local NGOs and other community actors have played a crucial role in promoting sustainable development and improving the lives of disadvantaged populations.

Coordination between governments and NGOs allows for great potential to effect sustainable change. A unified approach from public health officials at the international, national, regional, and local levels can empower NGOs and the communities in which they work to embrace a movement associated with bottom-up approaches rather than top-down decisions. This strategy incorporates community voices in decision making processes and allows NGOs and governments to formulate approaches to better respond to the needs of their communities.

MAHEFA Context

Following the 2009 political crisis, the majority of donors imposed restrictions on Madagascar which resulted in international isolation of the country. The crisis not only reduced the country's ability to plan and implement its development activities, but also deprived Madagascar of external assistance. Development partners no longer invested in the country and, as a result, few development assistance projects existed in Madagascar. This continued until 2014 when the international countries lifted sanctions, following presidential and legislative elections. Political challenges aside, the lack of a partnership between international and national agencies limited the exposure of NGOs to best practices for strong leadership and functional capacity. Local NGOs were hindered from learning and growing through an open exchange of ideas with foreign aid groups and other local partners. As a result, NGOs lacked the capacity to implement strong financial, administrative and operational management systems.

The MAHEFA Approach

The first three years of the USAID-supported MAHEFA program (May 2011 to May 2014) took place during the restricted period. Despite this, MAHEFA worked to ensure that all program activities would be in line with the country's national health policy. Additionally, the MAHEFA team informed the MOH's offices at the regional, district and sub-district (or *commune*) level of its activities and progress. MAHEFA focused its approach on providing grants to NGOs and building the capacity of their operational and technical practices so they had the knowledge, skills and tools to address the needs of their communities. MAHEFA built the capacity of 19 NGO grantees at the beginning of the program. This number reduced to 18 in program year three, and 15 in the program years four and five.

MAHEFA's strategic approach to NGO capacity building aimed to promote technical and organizational excellence and impose high standards in three major areas; finance and administration (F&A) systems, operational compliance practices, and technical data system and use. Focusing on these three areas of MAHEFA's strategic approach to building the competency of NGOs enabled the program to successfully achieve its objective of delivering sustainable community health services to the most remote regions of the country. This technical brief describes MAHEFA's work with NGO grantees outlining the accomplishments, challenges and recommendations as a result of MAHEFA's tailored approach to building NGO capacity over the course of five years. Key activities are described below.

Key Activities

1. Developed a focused grants monitoring strategy that would improve NGO capacity in three focus areas. The MAHEFA team designed a comprehensive grants strategy and communicated the goals of this strategy with grantees. As part of this big picture approach, MAHEFA, together with the NGOs, recognized the need to build capacity on standards to promote operational compliance. MAHEFA offered technical support by providing M&E training for technical officers and trainings on best practices for financial and administrative management to F&A staff. This general understanding of what MAHEFA would need in order to collaborate with NGOs helped to guide the approach for developing effective partnerships.

2. Conducted annual orientation workshops for all NGO grantees. With each new grant award cycle, the MAHEFA program conducted annual orientation workshops with all grantees. These workshops served the purpose of creating a forum for MAHEFA staff and NGOs to review important operational standards, discuss best practices for technical excellence, and identify expectations between various program stakeholders. The workshops established a foundation for compliance by understanding USAID rules and regulations, JSI policies, financial reporting procedures, technical reporting practices, and administrative functions, which served as the guiding principles for NGOs during work-planning activities, subsequent trainings and evaluations of NGO grantees throughout the year.

3. Trained NGOs on programmatic standards, reporting tools and data quality. MAHEFA mentored, coached and trained NGO staff on a variety of topics required for program development and implementation. MAHEFA worked with NGO staff to strengthen their M&E practices by identifying bench-

marks to indicate achievement or progress on targets. In order to build competency in these practices, program staff worked with NGOs to develop checklists that served as guidelines for technical, data, and monitoring quality. Specifically, the program responded swiftly and effectively to assist NGOs to prepare a Data Quality Analysis (DQA) form to assess their own data quality. More broadly, the combination of tools and trainings resulted in enhanced efforts in data quality as part of daily M&E activities. NGOs were able to conduct quarterly data quality assessments, which greatly contributed to accurate reporting into the country's health information system (HIS).

Box 1. NGO Self-Assessment Checklist

NGO are asked to do self-assessment on the following points:

Technical Quality

- Completion of CHV training
- Completion of CHV equipment and supplies in the Toby
- Supportive supervision of CHVs
- Support community actors to carry out their activities
- Ensure that its own field staff possess necessary technical knowledge and skills

Data Quality

- Submitted data has no mistakes
- Conduct data quality assessment (DQA) for CHVs

Finance and Admin Quality

- Ensure its staff receive necessary support to work in the field (fund transfer on time, receiving funds for activities on time, etc)
- Submit all reports on time

4. Supported NGOs to complete a monthly self-assessment to evaluate their performance and identify areas for improvement. To support with accountability of operational practices, MAHEFA developed a monthly self-assessment form to guide NGOs to identify success and areas for performance improvement. It also encouraged NGOs to reflect and assess their techniques by measuring objective items (e.g. meeting deadlines, complying with policy, submitting budgets and cash flow requests correctly). This tool highlighted areas of compliance in terms of contractual requirements, administrative responsibilities and financial management policies. This enabled MAHEFA program staff to develop tailored capacity building approaches for each NGO grantee.

5. Conducted quarterly review workshops and provided routine on-the-job mentoring to NGOs. At the start of the program, MAHEFA staff recognized the importance of effective communication with NGOs. The team identified multiple ways to address NGO capacity building needs, such as rou-

tine mentoring activities. To maximize operational efficiency, MAHEFA combined monthly routine on-the-job mentoring with supportive supervision and quarterly review workshops. These activities committed MAHEFA to providing continuous feedback and ensuring regular communication with NGO partners. Additionally, these meetings served as learning opportunities where program staff discussed activities and provided immediate feedback on NGO practices. On-site supportive supervision and workshops provided great opportunities for informal skills strengthening and refresher trainings to reinforce expectations and standards of excellence for different program development activities.

6. Conducted annual evaluations. By conducting financial audits and technical reviews at the end of each program year, MAHEFA program staff addressed major challenges for NGOs and jointly identified ways to improve their systems and build their capacity. These evaluations were important to assess and inspect overall impact of activities implemented throughout the year. The evaluation determined whether or not the efforts in all three focus areas (operations, finance, and technical) were improving the competency of the NGOs.

Results

At the end of the MAHEFA program, 19 NGOs had received capacity building training for excellence for one year, 18 received training for two years, and 15 received training for three years. MAHEFA's approach of capacity building for excellence helped NGOs identify operational, financial, and technical areas which needed to be addressed for improved competency and implementation of program activities. Figure 1 shows trends in quality for these three areas from FY 2015 to FY 2016. Across all areas, respect for standards or checklists (developed under activities three and four, above) increased over time.

Figure 1. NGO Grantees performance in three MAHEFA quality areas (Comparison FY2014 and FY2015)

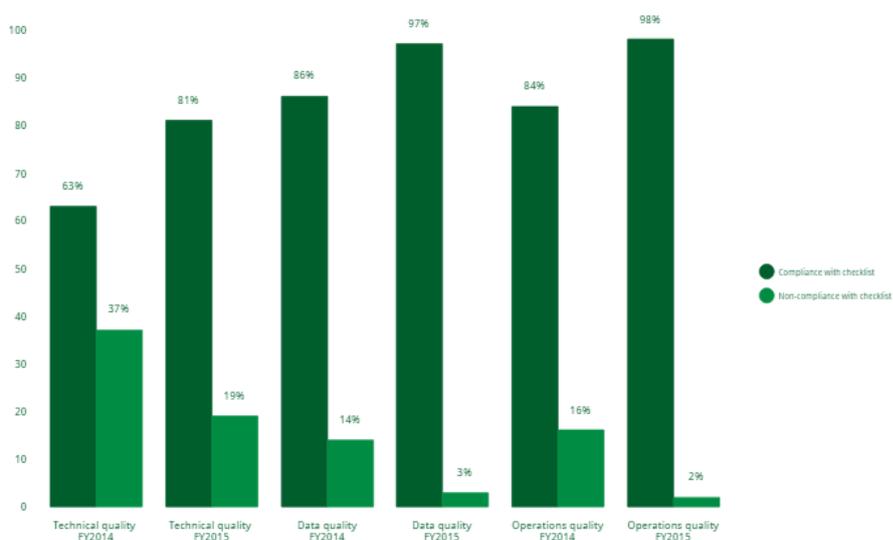


Figure 2. NGO annual burnrate (FY2012 - FY2016)

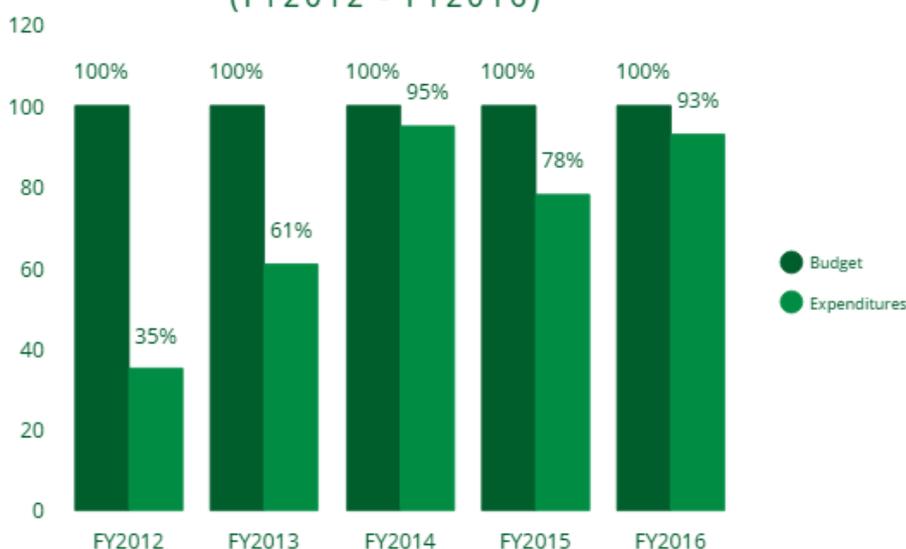


Figure 2 represents results from the analysis of the average burn rates of NGOs between FY 2012 – FY 2016. Over time, capacity building trainings, tools, and mentoring from MAHEFA program staff lead to NGOs becoming more accountable for financial management. These improved practices reflect clear and effective communication between MAHEFA program staff and NGO staff, adherence to suggested financial forecasting improved NGO's operational efficiency. By the end of the FY 2016 MAHEFA noticed that NGOs had smaller gaps between budget and expenditures and were able to plan monthly projections and request funds more accurately. Proper planning and budgeting indicate an understanding of programmatic strategy and costs associated with achieving specific outcomes and objectives. Accuracy in budgeting reflects budget accountability and a well-functioning operational system.

Note for Figure 2: The decrease in trends in 2015 reflects a period of new changes under the MAHEFA program as NGOs started working with the GOM. When reengagement with the GOM occurred, budgeting practices were unclear as NGOs were not sure what costs they were responsible for and what costs the GOM would absorb. It took several months for the GOM and NGOs to come to a mutual understanding of financial commitments and how they should budget for different activities. Once clear roles and liabilities were established, budgeting and expense trends increased again, demonstrated in FY16 results.

By focusing on three main areas which have direct impact on NGO's performance namely technical practices, data quality techniques, and operational practices, MAHEFA's approach of using simple tools, good communication and regular joint program reviews shows NGO's improvement within a short period of time, as shown in the figures above. Improvement in NGO's ability to project and track financial expenditures (monitored through the absorption rate) was simple but effective and could lead to more efficient in both programmatic and data quality areas.

Challenges

The geographic and environmental limitations hindered NGOs' capacity to operate effectively in some of the fokontans in which they worked. Therefore, NGOs had trouble managing their program districts and were not able to make frequent site visits to communes.

As the first community health program in these areas, therefore, the MAHEFA program simultaneously tested strategic ideas for technical, operational, and administrative activities while training NGOs. The "learning while implementing" practice, while necessary, required frequent modification in approaches and tools, which caused confusion among field teams.

MAHEFA shared different reporting tools for NGO partners to use. However, NGO staff did not always use the tools and at times failed to provide the program with important data.

Turnover rates for NGO field staff were very high throughout the life of the program. NGO staff left after MAHEFA and the NGOs had invested in them and retraining staff provided to be costly and cumbersome for program staff.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Hold a partner meeting at inception between MAHEFA and NGO teams to discuss and agree on roles, responsibilities and expectations between NGO grantees and the program. A workshop to discuss and set rules of engagement, as well as technical, financial and reporting standards is extremely important at the beginning of the relationship.

Ensure clear communication and collaboration with other stakeholders during an orientation meeting. The program should organize this before implementing activities, as effective communication will allow stakeholders at each level to understand their responsibilities, improve the quality of data they report, and reinforce the capacity of other actors to successfully implement strategic program activities.

Train, coach and monitor NGOs to respect the three focused areas of technical quality, administrative management, and data quality. As mentioned above, these three areas are equally important for ensuring effective program implementation. It is important for NGOs to maintain a solid understanding of the interconnectedness and complementarity of these areas.

Provide regular feedback on NGO performance through joint review program process. In addition to regular and routine communication between the program team and the NGO team, the program and NGO grantees should have a joint review meeting at least once every quarter, which will foster accountability on program progress against targets, and will provide an opportunity for NGOs to make adjustments as necessary.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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