11. Data Collection Made Fun

All aboard for 'station days' :

JENNIFER LENTFER and CONSTANCE CHASI[1] describe how 'station days' have made monitoring children's growth and development in Zimbabwe fun.

One of the most significant challenges of collecting data from children is finding a way to do it that is beneficial to both the child and the organisation. Often, data collection is a situation in which we take information from children but they do not necessarily gain. Tsungirirai, a communitybased organisation serving children in Norton, Zimbabwe, has developed a way regularly to collect accurate data on children's health and psychosocial status, which also provides a useful tool for distributing material goods and disseminating information to children and is enjoyable for them.

What is a Station Day?
A station day is a regular monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activity that is held at a centralised location for children participating in Tsungirirai's interventions. At the 'entrance' of the event, each child receives a 'ticket' that is used to verify the child's attendance and participation. Children then pass through various 'stations' that vary with the type of information to be collected or given.

Examples of stations include: height/weight measure, the 'clinic' where a medical check-up is performed, a 'counselling room' where the child can discuss questions focusing on his or her home life (such as 'What did you eat for dinner last night?' 'Whom do you usually talk to if you have a problem?' etc.) and an information station, in which they participate in a talk or discussion, on topics ranging from personal hygiene to HIV/AIDS. Once a child has stopped at all the stations and this is reflected on their 'ticket', they can move to the final station, where they play a game or receive a donated item, such as soap or a school notebook.

The response from children participating in station days has been overwhelmingly positive. Station days have also brought in a wide range of community members to assist in the activities, which is an important part of Tsungirirai's initiative to sensitise communities on the importance of listening to children. Not only do station days assist staff at Tsungirirai in assessing and evaluating the support services that they provide to children, they are an important mechanism for Tsungirirai to identify special cases and trends among the children. The interactions between staff, community members and children at station days highlight concerns and problems of children so that follow-ups, referrals, and changes to programming can be made.

Adapting M&E methods for children
NGOs and CBOs must make specific adjustments to conventional M&E and research methods and tools, in order to adapt them to the specific ages, interests and situations of the children they serve. Station days are an exciting and extremely promising means of combining data collection with other activities for children. The data collected at station days has proven to be consistent, reliable, comparable, and much simpler to collect than with other methods.

But most importantly, station days are fun and exciting, so the children themselves appreciate the activity. At a meeting Tsungirirai held with children recently, they were asked to describe what a station day is. The response? ‘It is a day that Tsungirirai makes sure we are healthy and happy.

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The STRIVE Project of Catholic Relief Services/Zimbabwe supports local initiatives to care for children affected by AIDS and build a better future for the children of Zimbabwe. Every year, more than 200,000 children in Zimbabwe suffer the death of a parent as a result of AIDS and by 2010, it is projected that 21% of all children in Zimbabwe will be orphaned.

STRIVE stands for Support To Replicable, Innovative, Village/communitylevel Efforts. The STRIVE Project focuses on providing holistic support to children and their caregivers through education assistance, food security, psycho-social support and child protection. It is funded by USAID and Swedish Sida, CRS works in partnership with local, national, and international organisations, providing financial and technical assistance.

Footnote

1. At the time of writing, Jennifer Lentfer worked with the Operations Research Unit of STRIVE but has since moved to CRS/Malawi. Constance Chasi is Children’s Coordinator of the Tsungirirai community organisation.