

UNDERSTANDING DATA MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES WITHIN DISTRICT LEVEL HIV, TB AND STI PROGRAMMES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Introduction

Understanding the sources, validity and accuracy of data is extremely important in the development of the HIV, TB and STI (HAST) business plans. It is important that both the finance and programme managers monitor the implementation of all indicators including budget and output measures. Effective data management can help in tracking progress against indicators in each level of a performance-based management cycle. This includes data collection to ensure accurate data records exist, data quality maintenance, accurate data cleaning and analysis, decision making, and reporting or dissemination.

District and provincial HAST managers use various information sources to compile their business plans. These include health information management and financial monitoring systems. The multiplicity of data sources may provide a desired triangulation advantage, but challenges around sourcing, quality, and accuracy of health data exist and need to be addressed. The aim of this project was to identify and discuss these challenges in order to make recommendations to support improvements in data management.

Methods

The data collection process involved facilitated district-level focus group discussions between the FINCAP project team and the district health directors, HIV, AIDS, STI and TB (HAST) coordinators and managers and support staff. Some districts brought on board sub-district coordinators responsible for the management and/or coordination of health facilities. These meetings took place between August and November 2019.

Data management challenges

District health engagements have highlighted serious challenges associated with data management including:

Shortage of administrative staff and data capturers

Despite the availability of data management tools most facilities are seriously understaffed, with long-standing

data and administration vacancies unfilled. Additionally, clinical staff do not have the capacity and time to assist with data capturing.

Information technology (IT) challenges

Many facilities still use paper-based systems to record and manage their data. Poor network connectivity also limits optimal utilisation of web-based systems in many facilities. Some of the computers that the facility, sub-district and district managers use have outdated software that is not compatible with the available web-based information systems and also have limited hard drive space to install new software. Further, IT support is limited at the district level which often leads to computer equipment not being optimally managed and utilised.

Data capturing challenges

District management teams have emphasised a serious shortage of data capturers. However, PEPFAR supported districts reported fewer data capturing challenges than districts without PEPFAR support. PEPFAR support allowed for additional trained and equipped data clerks at clinics. Districts acknowledged the risk associated with their dependency on PEPFAR supported organizations for the capturing of their data and the need for district budgets to adequately provide for this cadre.

Most facilities are manually capturing the data with large capturing backlogs that compromise needs assessments or priorities-setting, and reporting on HAST interventions. Data quality assurance is not effectively managed or assessed at the facility level leading district offices to question the accuracy of the data reported.

There was a strong view that the Health Patient Registration System (HPRS) could potentially reduce or eliminate data management hassles if it were properly implemented. However, funding for the HPRS needs to be mainstreamed and included in the HIV conditional grant or primary health care (PHC) budget to strengthen the general health information systems which could strategically address HIV and TB data management issues.

Recommendations

1. The effectiveness of information systems should be improved and operate optimally to provide accurate and up to date information for budgeting and reporting.
2. Districts should normalise and synchronise the usage of effective and reliable information management systems and tools.
3. There is a need for training and ongoing technical support on data management particularly at sub-district and facility levels.
4. Increase the number of administrative staff to support general functioning of the HAST programmes and to ensure efficient management of data systems.
5. Where facilities are still using paper-based data tools, it is recommended that districts, with the help of provinces, modernize and advance the technology to improve data capturing, processing and quality control for more efficient and timely decision making and actions.

References

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