INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

A PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION QUALITY CASE STUDY

The Pakistan Reading Project

The Pakistan Reading Project (PRP), a seven-year project designed to bolster literacy levels in primary schools throughout Pakistan, had a reach of 1.7 million students and over 27,000 teachers. How did this expansive project, which was not meeting its outcome goals, make a turnaround in its third year of implementation to ultimately become a highly recognized program at scale? This case study explores how the PRP was able to make a shift to (1) identify and track data linked to the theory of change (TOC), (2) create a data review process for quality improvement decision making, and (3) build capacity among stakeholders to review data so that they could make course corrections and program implementation decisions.

With a **$144 million** investment, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Government of Pakistan (GOP) established the Pakistan Reading Project (PRP) to improve literacy levels in primary schools throughout Pakistan. PRP operated at scale within seven decentralized provinces/regions of the Government of Pakistan for over seven years. The project aimed to improve grade 1 and 2 literacy achievement by increasing teachers' capacity to deliver research-informed literacy instruction. PRP accomplished this by creating a supportive classroom environment, creating policies and systems that enhance research-informed practices, and increasing community literacy engagement.

PRP was designed and delivered by a consortium of NGOs active in Pakistan, including Creative Associates (CA), the Institute for Rural Management (IRM), and World Learning (WL), and led by the International Rescue Committee (IRC). At close, PRP was the largest project the IRC had delivered in its 133-year history and the largest USAID-awarded early-grade literacy grant. Operational from 2013-2020 and concentrating on first and second-grade students' reading achievement, PRP served 69 districts across seven provinces/regions in Pakistan, Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), Balochistan, Gilgit Baltistan (GB), Sindh, Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) including the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs), previously known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

REACHING
over 1.7 million students

TRAINING
over 27,000 TEACHERS

SUPPORTING
the government to adopt
55 NEW READING POLICIES
in **7 PROVINCES/REGIONS**

DISTRIBUTING
over 6.9 million
READING LEARNING MATERIALS

Supporting
110
TEACHER TRAINING INSTITUTIONS

Despite numerous modifications and budget reductions, by the project's end, PRP met and surpassed the bulk of its results framework targets—reaching over 1.7 million students, training over 27,000 teachers, distributing over 6.9 million reading learning materials, awarding 161 grants, supporting the government to adopt 55 new reading policies in 7 provinces/regions, and supporting 110 teacher training institutions. PRP's achievements were well-documented by internal and external evaluations of the project—implementation, and quasi-experimental, cost effective descriptive, and external impact research. In addition, the project was widely recognized by the donor, Pakistani stakeholders at multiple levels, and the international humanitarian and development communities. For example, PRP was awarded the 2020 Library of Congress International Literacy Award. In addition, the project was included in a compendium of research on effective projects at scale conducted by the Gate's Foundation, *Learning at Scale*. Moreover, after the donor carried out its Data Quality Assessment audit, the Office of Inspector General of the United States Government rated PRP a "very good project" for its MEL operating procedures and data management processes. By multiple measures, PRP was a success.

Challenges

However, PRP was not always able to celebrate this level of achievement. In fact, in the third year of the project, PRP faced a crisis point. Although PRP had a well-developed theory of change and work plan, an elaborate monitoring and evaluation plan that was tracked through an automated Monitoring and Evaluation Information System (MEIS), and a dedicated and talented project staff, the project faced many challenges. PRP was not on pace to meet many outcome targets. Some challenges included:

Teaching and learning materials were not being delivered to teachers on time.

Some teachers were getting more than the allotted number of visits; others were getting none.

The project was not meeting its student beneficiary goals.

The number of trained teachers diminished in Cohort 1 from year one to year two, but it was not apparent why.

Teachers were being trained, but it was not clear if they were getting the full training package.

It was not evident if teachers were implementing the program as designed or if students were growing in literacy skills from quarter to quarter.

How did PRP turn things around? This case study tells the story of how PRP began to use implementation data for decision making. Specifically, we set out to answer the following: What strategies did PRP use to promote continuous program quality improvement at scale?

In summary, we identified three key elements that helped PRP to increase its ability to use data for program improvement; the project (1) gathered, interpreted, and processed the right data, (2) established a system to review data on program delivery quality (beyond inputs and outputs), and (3) built the capacity of stakeholders (including local governments) to review data for decision making.

The results of this case study were based on key informant interviews and an extensive review of program documents. In-depth interviews were carried out with PRP staff who were instrumental in establishing the PRP MEIS and creating the infrastructure for decision making at each level of the project. We also derived insights from interview records with key stakeholders conducted during the research for PRP's Best Practices Report and from the author's first-hand knowledge as a Technical Advisor to the project.

Gathering, Interpreting, and Processing the Right Data

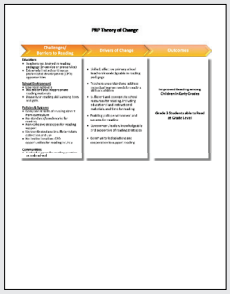
At the project onset, PRP created a theory of change, MEL plan, and results framework by gathering a team with USAID project experience. Building consensus among stakeholders, several project Senior Management Team (SMT) members, along with the IRC Headquarters (HQ) technical team, partners, and government stakeholders, participated in the planning. PRP used donor and IRC MEL guidance to choose indicators and to create its MEL framework and work plan.

The project's theory of change focused on student literacy outcomes, augmented through multipronged interventions that included: (1) improved classroom practices; (2) policies and systems that support reading; and (3) increased community-based opportunities to practice reading outside of school. (See PRP Theory of Change and Guidance Tools in Developing a Theory of Change)

The PRP MEL tracking system that initially evolved was a comprehensive (and incredibly data-heavy), automated online MEIS that also served as a data repository for the project—a virtual data clearing house for all the data the project collected. Throughout the project, MEL national, provincial, and district-based teams worked with the PRP program team to ensure regular, accurate data entry to (1) facilitate progress tracking as per work plan achievements; (2) collate and analyze performance data for the approved MEL Plan; and (3) review, consolidate, and store evidence for project progress. This created a central repository of accurate, reliable, and valid data and related documents for management and reporting purposes. To make monitoring data available for review, the project also developed a comprehensive MEIS dashboard (See Figure 1: PRP Dashboard Landing Page) to present data in a summarized display to facilitate data-based logistical decision making at the national, provincial, and district level.

Although the PRP was meticulously collecting monitoring data and conveying outputs to the donor in regular reports, in year three the project discovered that it was not on pace to obtain intermediate outcomes and some of its life of project (LOP) targets. This included such targets as aggregate student numbers and student achievement outcomes. It became apparent that the team had not yet differentiated between monitoring as a means of reporting to the donor, versus monitoring to inform program decision making and continuous improvement. It also became clear that the volume of data was hindering its use for program improvement, indicating that the project needed a better way to interpret the data and put it to use.

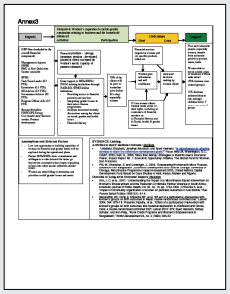
PRP THEORY OF CHANGE



What is it?: A link to an example theory of change from PRP.

Suggestions for use: Projects can modify the template to fit program purposes.

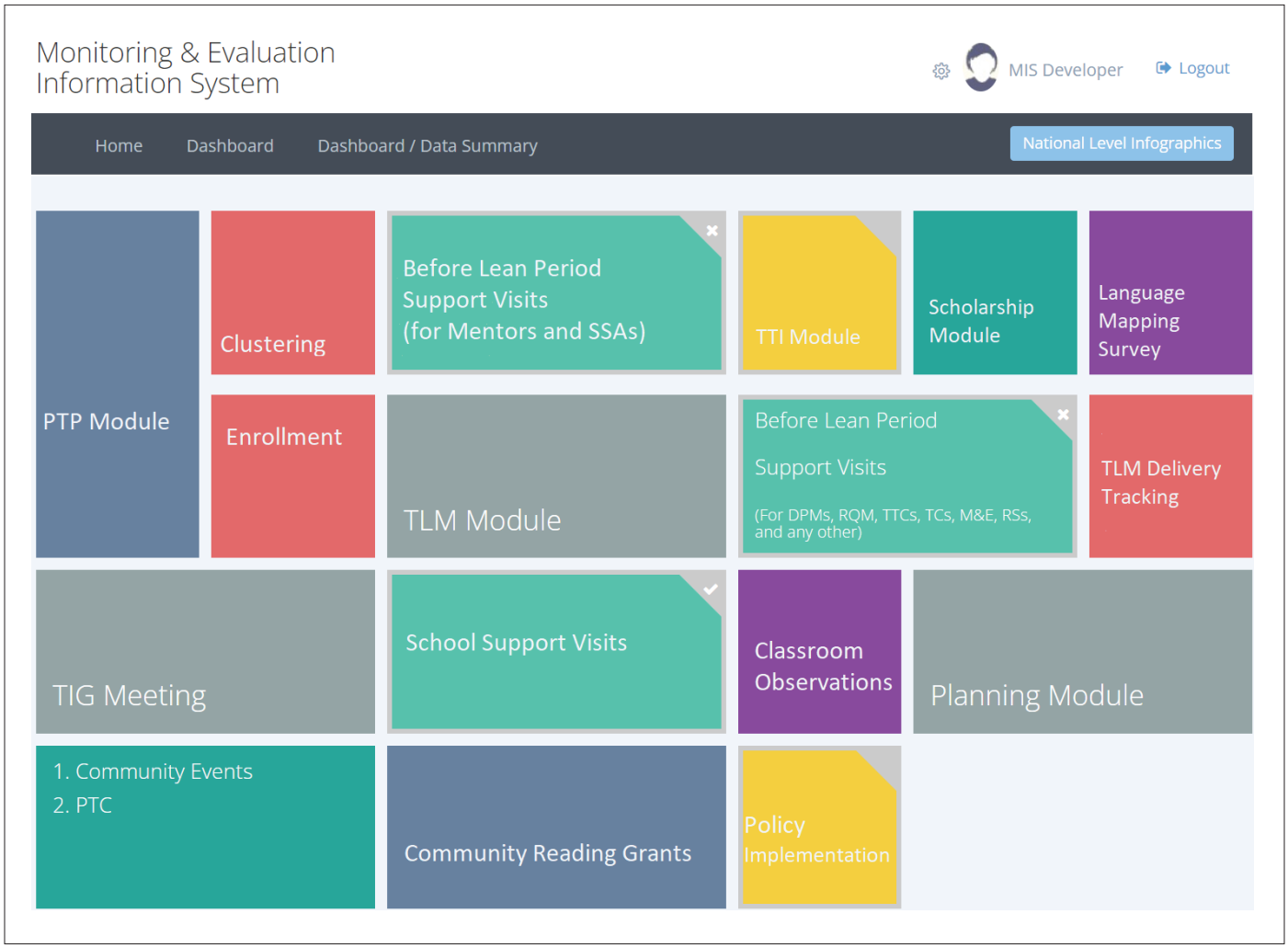
GUIDANCE TOOLS IN DEVELOPING A THEORY OF CHANGE



What is it?: A link to TOC guidance tools, found in the Program Implementation Quality (PIQ) Conceptual framework.

Suggestions for Use: Projects can utilize guidance in developing a theory of change, the foundations for program implementation quality (PIQ).

FIGURE 1. PRP Dashboard Landing Page



At this point, the HQ technical team initiated regular review meetings led by the project Senior Management Team (SMT) to analyze project data and discuss how to track progress toward intermediate and long-term outcomes. During these discussions, three critical gaps in data management became apparent:

- Not tracking outputs to targets at the monthly and quarterly marks
- Not tracking quality indicators around the theory of change
- Not having program quality indicators visualized on the dashboard to inform timely decisions
- (See summary in Table 1: Gathering the Right Data for Quality Program Improvement)

> **"Representing all the quality-level data on the dashboard requires a lot of programming at the back end so that it picks and shows the right information, and that the program teams are able to act on information. The data has to be entered, presented, and segregated out for level of use—from the national to the district level. This was a challenge we had to overcome."**
>
> **—PRP SENIOR MONITORING EVALUATION & LEARNING ADVISOR**

Through ongoing discussions, program staff began to shift from primarily monitoring outputs to additionally examining quality indicators for program decision making and continuous improvement. Some of the shift came from a change in the type of data the project collected, looking at factors that were critical to the TOC. That was aided by a revision in data collection tools, modified to include measurable indicators of implementation/quality. The visual representation of these indicators on a "mini dashboard" allowed stakeholders to understand the data more easily; in turn, this led to robust discussions about how to ensure program quality and which indicators to prioritize.

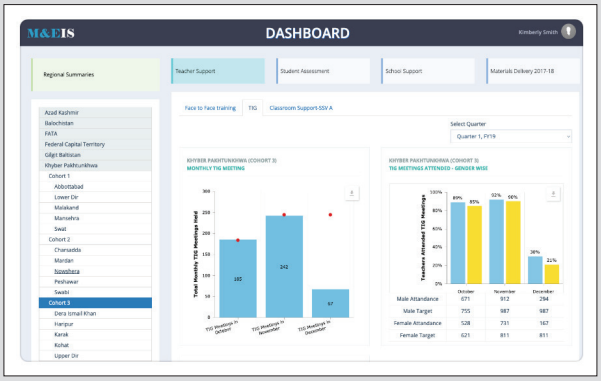
> **"In the beginning the team is asked to report on all kinds of indicators, and after two to three reportings, when the team is asked why this indicator is not reported, then the team becomes the advocate that these are unnecessary indicators, and that we should not report on that one. It is a process. In the beginning my goal was—on the workplan or with the indicators—to know where our destination is."**
>
> **—PRP CHIEF OF PARTY**

TABLE 1: Gathering the Right Data for Quality Program Improvement

Problem	Correction	Example of Outcome Based on Correction
CHALLENGE 1: Not Tracking Intermediate Targets		
Tracking aggregate achievements but not towards monthly and quarterly targets	Discussion with leadership about how to measure whether the project is on pace by tracking achievement against monthly and quarterly targets (i.e., school support visits and school support visit targets for the quarter) on the dashboard and in reports The MEL team created dashboard data graphs that visualized quarterly targets as well as aggregate outputs	Capturing total mentoring visits for teachers at the district level against target mentoring visits for teachers at the district level for the quarter, the project was able to detect when it needed to increase the number of school support visits for specific districts and schools.
CHALLENGE 2: Not Tracking the TOC		
Not tracking intervention quality indicators	The tech team identified key factors of the TOC captured in monitoring tools. Changes were made to classroom observation forms to capture data better aligned with key elements of the TOC. On the revised tools, training was conducted across partners for all provinces/regions. The MEL team created representations of the quality of program delivery on a smaller sub-section of the dashboard, designed for program implementation quality review. (Noted in Figure 2: PRP Mini-Dashboard Example (with Target Indicators)	As *% student workbook use* was included on the teacher observation form and used as a proxy for teachers implementing the intervention as designed. This enabled the program team to identify teachers who needed more support with implementation.
CHALLENGE 3: Not Representing Quality Indicators on the Dashboard to Make It Accessible and Understandable		
Project dashboard only captured aggregate data monitoring indicators, but did visualize indicators on the quality of program delivery	Monitoring data, disaggregated by male and female, was represented by graphs on the dashboard. Factors related to the quality of program delivery for teacher support were added (e.g., face-to-face training, and ongoing support of teacher inquiry groups and classrooms from school support associates).	Capturing the number of teachers during a quarter attending a training compared to the number of teachers attending the required number of trainings to constitute a "trained teacher" by project definition.

Example 1: Data-Informed Decision-Making

PRP Mini-Dashboard Teacher Inquiry Groups



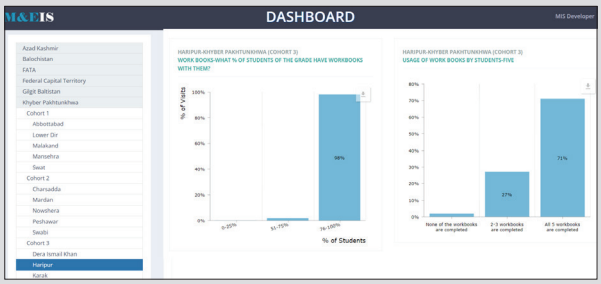
Note: TIG = Teacher Inquiry Groups

This dashboard thumbnail shows how the PRP data were accessible at three levels: the project-wide level (e.g., Regional summaries), the provincial Cohort level and the district level (e.g., Haripur in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). Observable at the top of this dashboard page are four dropdown menus under which key factors of PRP's TOC were visualized and tracked through graphs: teacher support, student assessment and school support. On time teaching and learning material delivery was an essential factor in being able to carry out the intervention. Under teacher support we see the three critical arms of teacher training (central to the TOC) that were tracked for implementation and cost-effectiveness: Face to Face training, TIG, and Classroom Support. Observable elements captured on project monitoring tools, reported by project staff, are further delineated under each of these drop-down menus.

For full images and further explanation of how the dashboard was used for PIQ decision-making, please see the PRP Dashboard Walk.

Example 2: Data-Informed Decision-Making

PRP Workbook Use



To help district managers determine to what extent the intervention was being implemented, the project captured and reviewed data at the classroom level. These data included the percentage of students in classrooms who had workbooks and the number of workbooks that were completed per the project pace of lessons for the term. This information helped the team know which areas needed more support.

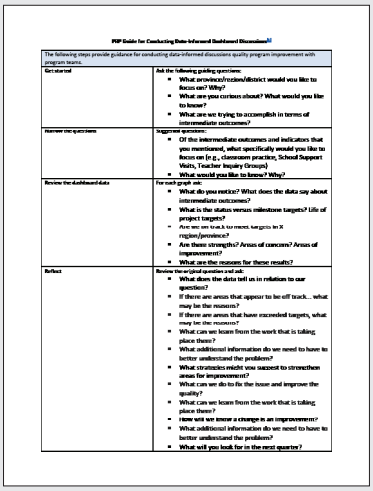
For full images and further explanation of how the dashboard was used for PIQ decision-making, please see the PRP Dashboard Walk.

Establishing a Review System of Program Quality Data

Once the team had identified key program quality indicators, revised monitoring tools, trained staff, and made the indicators visible on the dashboard, PRP established a system for continuous monitoring and learning by putting in place regular meetings that included MEL staff, technical specialists, government officials and those responsible for program implementation. The mini dashboard was designed in such a way that teams at different levels of the system could review the data that was relevant to them—at district, province/region, and national levels.

A series of meetings with the aim of discussing program decision making were outlined at regular intervals. (See PRP Data Review Process). For example, each year the PRP hosted annual lessons learned workshops to review project-wide learnings. The PRP central leadership team met quarterly with the HQ technical team to review important trends. The SMT met monthly to discuss data and progress. Each month project technical leads and Home Office Technical Unit reviewed progress toward targets and current challenges. Every 6 months the MEL team would meet to discuss MEL best practices,

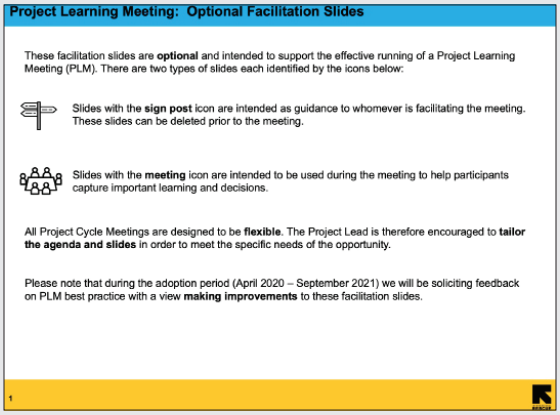
PRP DATA-INFORMED DISCUSSION GUIDE



What Is It?: An example of questions used to guide central, provincial and district teams in reviewing dashboard data.

Suggestions for Use: Project teams can modify PRP's Guide to create a project templates for samples questions to guide data-informed discussions at multiple levels.

IRC PROJECT LEARNING MEETING FACILITATION DECK

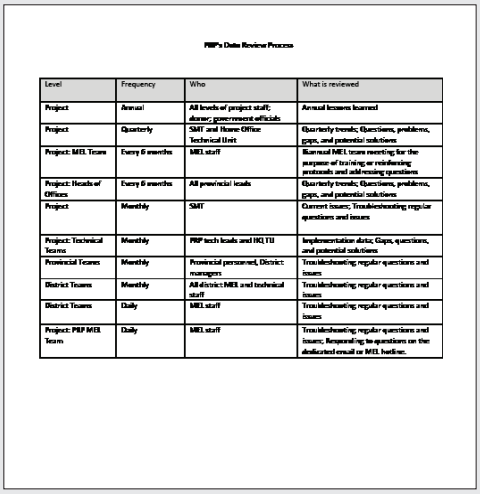


What Is It?: This deck guides planning for program data-informed discussions.

Suggestions for Use: The slide deck provides guidance in planning purpose, frequency, and agenda of data-based meetings. For program quality improvement, focus on the Outcomes and Evidence topics within the deck.

resolve problems around quality data collection and reporting, and review data for monitoring for donor targets as well as for program quality implementation. Guided by SMT members, Heads of Office from each province/region came together each quarter to collectively discuss data from the project at large and make necessary course-correcting decisions. Provincial teams met monthly with members of the central office to review province/region-wide data and make decisions for their region. District offices, led by members of their regional/province team, also met once a month to look at data and troubleshoot issues. In addition, the ground-level district teams continuously dealt with on-the-ground realities which frequently arose. To deal with any questions in a timely way, the MEL team had a dedicated email and phone line for troubleshooting so that MEL team members could get quick responses to field queries. A key element of this meeting structure was to have several meetings that included both MEL staff and project staff. See PRP's Data Review Process, below. (See Data-Informed Discussion Guide, and IRC Project Learning Meeting Facilitation Deck.)

PRP's DATA REVIEW PROCESS



PRP's Data Review Process

Level	Frequency	Who	What is reviewed
Project	Annual	All levels of project staff; donor; government officials	Annual lessons learned
Project	Quarterly	SMT and Home Office Technical Unit	Quarterly trends; Questions, problems, gaps, and potential solutions
Project: MEL Team	Every 6 months	MEL staff	Bi-annual MEL team meeting for the purpose of training or reinforcing protocols and addressing questions
Project: Heads of Offices	Every 6 months	All provincial leads	Quarterly trends; Questions, problems, gaps, and potential solutions
Project	Monthly	SMT	Current issues; Troubleshooting regular questions and issues
Project: Technical Teams	Monthly	PRP tech leads and HQ TU	Implementation data; Gaps, questions, and potential solutions
Provincial Teams	Monthly	Provincial personnel, District managers	Troubleshooting regular questions and issues
District Teams	Monthly	All district MEL and technical staff	Troubleshooting regular questions and issues
District Teams	Daily	MEL staff	Troubleshooting regular questions and issues
Project: PRP MEL Team	Daily	MEL staff	Troubleshooting regular questions and issues; Responding to questions on the dedicated email or MEL hotline.

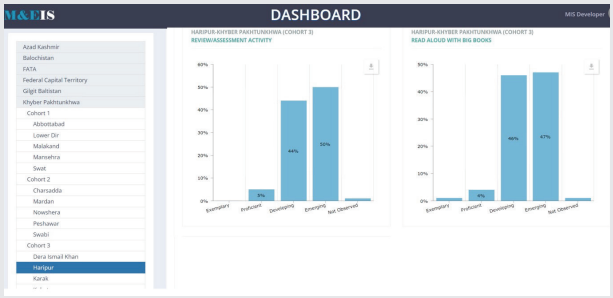
What is it?: An example of how PRP established a system to review data at all levels of the project

Suggested Use: Projects can modify to use as template for planning meetings.

See also guidance in IRC's Project learning meeting facilitation slide templates, linked here.)

Example 3: Data-Informed Decision-Making

Teacher Instructional Practices Proficiencies (Classroom Formative Assessment and Read Alouds)



The PRP technical team identified five high impact strategies that, if carried out by teachers in the classroom, were hypothesized to lead to increased learning gains for students. Teacher instructional behaviors were observed during classroom visits and tracked on the dashboard for review and program quality improvement decisions. This dashboard thumbnail shows the percentage of teachers in the Haripur Cohort (district level) demonstrating proficiency in two of these strategies.

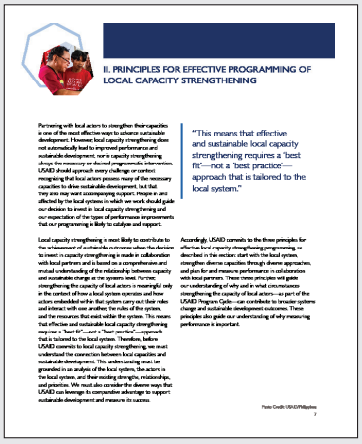
For full images and further explanation of how the dashboard was used for PIQ decision-making, please see the PRP Dashboard Walk

Building Capacity of Stakeholders to Review Data for Program Quality Improvement

Once quality program indicators were identified and visualized on the newly established mini dashboard, and a review system established, another gap became apparent. Although the project team was quite skilled at tracking output data and making course corrections around project logistics, it was evident that querying data for program quality improvement was new for the team. This capacity needed to be developed at all levels of stakeholders. This was done through regular review meetings as well as in workshops and meetings called to address specific issues.

The initial impetus for change came from the HQ technical unit as they initiated meetings and modeled how to identify quality indicators, ask essential questions, analyze the data, and provide a supportive environment for discussing gaps and potential solutions. Due to the inability to get VISAs for in-country visits, much of the HQ technical support was conducted remotely. The lack of the opportunity to meet face to

CAPACITY BUILDING PLAN


II. PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING OF LOCAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

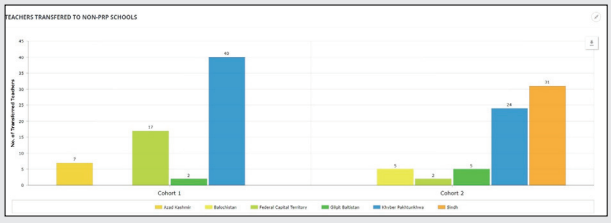
"This means that effective and sustainable local capacity strengthening requires a 'best fit'—not a 'best practice'—approach that is tailored to the local system."

What is it? The tools linked here from the PIQ conceptual framework help foster staff development around data informed decision-making.

Suggestion for Use: These resources provide guidance in identifying capacity gaps and planning trainings.

Example 4: Data-Informed Decision-Making

PRP Teachers Transferred



As PRP began to review project-wide data more frequently, the senior team identified a significant number of PRP-trained teachers being transferred to non-intervention schools. The data also indicated that teacher transfers were having a detrimental effect on the intervention delivery. The team began to track transferred PRP teachers so that they could provide condensed PRP training to the teacher replacements in project intervention schools.

For full images and further explanation of how the dashboard was used for PIQ decision-making, please see the PRP Dashboard Walk

face meant that concepts and processes that could have been more easily discussed and modeled in person required more time to transmit. In-person dialogue would have made the initial project capacity-building process more efficient. See Table 3 for sample questions to help guide program quality improvement discussions. (See Capacity Building Plan)

As capacity was steadily built at all levels—the central management, the regional teams, and the district team—the review system enabled the PRP to successfully make a shift from primarily tracking program outputs, to also looking at key quality indicators and making program-wide quality course corrections. This was ramped up and began to be fully functional in Cohort 3 of the project.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Pakistan Reading Project operated at scale within seven provinces/regions of the Government of Pakistan over seven years. Initially under-resourced for monitoring and evaluation for a project its size, PRP boosted its MEL staff, training, and quality standards at each level of the project—central management, regional/provincial and district teams, along with their government counterparts. After revising monitoring tools to better capture quality indicators and creating a summary mini dashboard with visualizations that made the data more accessible to stakeholders, creating a review system at all levels of the project, and building capacity at all levels of the project, PRP was able to track critical elements of the TOC. Tracking data against monthly, quarterly, and LOP targets helped the team to see where it was on pace, to allocate extra resources and support where needed, and to successfully exceed the bulk of the project results framework.

Based on the learnings from PRP, the following recommendations are offered for consideration at each phase of the MEAL project cycle for programs at scale. These recommendations will help those programs identify and track outcome indicators efficiently, and build capacity among stakeholders at various levels of the project to review essential data and make quality program improvement decisions:

PHASE 1: DESIGN PHASE

- In the proposal process, ensure the adequate budget is allotted for data management and dashboard visualization, as well as MEL personnel at all levels of the project, particularly staffing close to the implementation level. Make preliminary recommendations regarding the type of dashboard infrastructure needed per the scope and scale of the project and the number and type of indicators being tracked.
- At the design stage, include project outcomes to support local governments in enhancing their data collection quality, visualization, and use of data beyond standard EMIS (Education Management Information Systems) access and attendance numbers. Build systems and capacity for governments to track numbers more accurately and resources so that governments have the data needed for decision making for cost-efficient programming. Consider building government capacity regarding tracking quantitative and qualitative factors, as well as providing given training about how to create and maintain a dashboard for program quality review.
- Include time and budget for stakeholder capacity building at all levels of the project, especially central and regional staff, to develop a learning culture and an understanding of how to select and track critical data for decision making that is essential for program quality improvement.

PHASE 2: PLANNING START-UP

- Make provisions for the work plan to include time and budget for field leadership and HQ technical team support of the project in selecting donor and project level indicators, as well as the development of dashboard visualization appropriate to the team's size, scale, and capacity.
- To aid cost-efficiency and best use of resources, be selective about what data is collected and monitored, rather than amassing an immense clearing house. Identify the essential indicators for tracking project outputs and intermediate outcomes linked to the TOC.
- Ensure there is dialogue and collaboration between the MEL team (who know how to outline indicators and how to verify and present data) and the program technical team (who know what program standards are and how to reach desired outcomes).

PHASE 3: EARLY IMPLEMENTATION AND LEARNING PHASE

- Plan ongoing capacity-building activities for staff and stakeholders at all levels, not only how to collect aggregate data but also how to track data towards targets at monthly and quarterly intervals and use analysis for decision making. Develop manuals for each phase of the project. Create a specific MEL project helpline for timely responses to questions.
- Equip facilitators within project MEL and technical teams to lead data discussion meetings at each project level—district, provincial, technical, and central management teams.
- Collect program quality data at frequent intervals to quickly identify gaps—i.e., transferred teachers, lack of sufficient dosage in training, reduced teacher implementation time with materials due to weather/changes, etc. Examples of key questions to ask: Are instructional materials being delivered on time? Are there any contingencies that prevent teachers or students receiving a sufficient dosage of the intervention? Are project teachers being transferred out of project schools? If so, how can the project provide condensed training for teachers who are new to the implementation?

PHASE 4: FULL IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

- Track quality indicators on monitoring tools. Ensure key factors are measurable, considered critical elements for the theory of change, and essential in decision making about additional resources, support, etc. For example, the *percentage of student workbook use* was included on the PRP Teacher Observation Form and used as a proxy for teachers implementing the intervention as designed, providing research-based literacy instructional practices.
- Include time and budget for regular stakeholder meetings and problem-solving workshops at all levels of the project to select and track critical data for decision making, essential for program implementation quality.

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