Improving Health System Readiness to Access and Manage Donor Funds in Ghana

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Context

The USAID Systems for Health Project (2014-2019) works with Ghana Health Service (GHS) to scale up evidence-based, high-impact health interventions to improve health outcomes, particularly for women and children. The project works to strengthen vital health systems building blocks, including health financing by enhancing the readiness of GHS to directly access and manage USAID and other donor funds.

Systems for Health works with all 118 Regional and District Health Management Teams (RHMTs and DHMTs) in five of Ghana’s ten regions. Upon initial assessment in 2015, only 18% of R/DHMTs demonstrated the capacity to directly manage donor funds, based on criteria including governance, financial and cash management, procurement processes, asset and inventory management, reporting and program/donor experience.

Methods

One of the project objectives is that 60% of the R/DHMTs will have the capacity to directly manage donor funds by 2019. The project employs several implementation strategies:

1) Financial Management Training: A three-day residential training addressed gaps identified in the initial assessment. Topics included donor funds management, cost principles, budgeting and proposal preparation, internal controls, procurement and inventory management, and donor compliance requirements. Participants included technical managers, Regional/District Directors, and accountants.

2) On-Site Coaching: Systems for Health reassessed the R/DHMTs annually, providing targeted coaching to address gaps and challenges identified.

3) Performance-Based Grants: Over four years, Systems for Health completed four rounds of performance-based grants to the RHMTs to implement district-based activities related to improving quality of and access to care. The project provided technical assistance to the RHMTs in data-driven program design, proposal writing, grants management, and reporting.

Findings

As of September 2018, 81% of R/DHMTs covered by the project demonstrated adequate capacity to manage US Government funds, exceeding the project’s target of 60%. Capacity measures include systems for financial and cash management as well as governance and administrative processes.

Since the RHMTs were required to respond to the RFAs for each grant, they strengthened their ability to write responsive applications and thereby potentially leverage other sources of funding. During each new round of grants RHMTs progressively improved their management of these awards.

Challenges

Staff attrition remains an ongoing challenge to sustainability. To mitigate this issue, the project engaged entire GHS management teams in its interventions. This equipped a broader range of staff within R/DHMTs with the skills to access and manage diversified sources of funding.

Performance-based grants have supported training and on-site coaching for health workers in maternal, newborn and child health, malaria, family planning, and infection prevention and control. Current grants support quality improvement projects designed by each region to reduce maternal, newborn, and child deaths.

Figure 1. A map of Ghana showing the results of financial risk assessments during coaching visits to district health directorates

Figure 2. Percentage of health directorates with adequate capacity to manage funds, 2015 to 2018

Other Considerations

The assessment largely focuses on financial and administrative risk, but technical and programmatic capacity is also critical to the appropriate management of US-government funds. It is recommended that organizational capacity assessments and tailored technical assistance in program development and management be a key component of future support to government health directorates working towards government-to-government funding.

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