DEVELOPMENT GATEWAY
Solutions that empower

POLICY BRIEF:

Increasing the Impact of Results Data

SUMMARY

This brief outlines perspectives on the **present state of development results data** from nearly 500 interviews with local practitioners in three countries: Ghana, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania. We outline insights on local attitudes toward results data, how actors actually use data, and the extent to which results influence policy and programs. We then make recommendations for **improving future investments in development results data.**

INTRODUCTION

Governments, development partners (DPs), and implementers spend up to $2 billion every year collecting data on the results of development activities. The post-2015 development agenda calls for more results indicators and larger investments in data. At this inflection point, we examine a critical question: **how do we make investments in results data most effective?**

The goal of collecting and using results data—information on the outputs and outcomes of development activities—is to improve the delivery of goods and services and to track development effectiveness. Data on **results** should help DPs, governments, and implementers better employ **resources** to achieve specific economic and social goals.

With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Development Gateway (DG) and its partners conducted nearly 500 interviews with local practitioners who produce and use results data in Ghana, Tanzania, and Sri Lanka, from September 2015-April 2016. We sought an **on-the-ground perspective** on how local and national governments, development agencies, and implementers collect, manage, and use output and outcome data in the health and agriculture sectors. This brief synthesizes our central observations about how results data is perceived and used, and how the development community can **increase the utility of results data.**

LOCAL ATTITUDES TOWARD RESULTS DATA

Data about results is limited at the sub-national level. Most data covers only output or activity reporting, and many respondents struggled to distinguish between results data and data in general.

Those who do distinguish and understand the distinct role of results lament a lack of locally relevant outcome data. Most available data are output indicators—like agricultural production figures or patient service statistics—that are intended for upward reporting. These data are less helpful for understanding the effects of interventions at a district level or below. Many local officials are eager to manage for real results, and express significant **unmet demand for localized outcome information to inform local programming.**

> ***"If someone modifies livestock farming, builds a good house, takes children to school, and increases from one meal to three meals [per day]…these are changes that you can notice…though we rarely reach that outcome level…"***
>
> **--Agriculture Extension Officer, Tanzania**

Regarding output data, respondents reported that **local service delivery workers often struggle under the burden of data collection**—too much data to collect with too little time and resources. Many perceive **trade-offs between collecting data and actually delivering services** (e.g., seeing patients or training farmers).

We encountered widespread concern that **those who collect data often do not understand the intended uses of the data.** This creates a 'broken link' between producers and users: collectors have few incentives to prioritize data collection, and thus provide inaccurate, incomplete or late data. As a consequence, data users (e.g. district-, regional- or national-level staff) receive questionable reports, estimates, and projections that are inadequate for decision-making. The end result: neither data collectors nor would-be analysts see the value of results-relevant data, leading to poor quality data that are not used.

Finally, respondents report that **data is shared inequitably among development actors.** NGOs and development partners typically access the data they need from the government, but government users report being 'in the dark' when it comes to donor/NGO activities and results. Many local officials recognized the operational value of data generated by communities, donors or implementers. Some respondents reported collecting ad-hoc feedback on the quality of services, but this feedback was not systematically captured, reported or considered during management discussions.[1] But government users are reluctant—or often not allowed—to use non-government data or statistics for official purposes.

HOW RESULTS DATA IS USED IN PRACTICE

While data use is presently limited, ambitions exist for better results measurement and data use—but **skills, tools, incentives, and resources must be upgraded** to make this possible. We see opportunities for governments and agencies to promote more effective data use in the short and medium term.

Most examples of use consisted of limited trend analysis or indicator tabulations, e.g., crop production trends or monthly outpatient visits. While necessary for reporting, we found **few examples where such analysis was used to alter a program or policy,** and few linkages between data collection and operational work.

Across respondents, analysis was consistently seen as "someone else's" responsibility. Results-relevant data is reported under the assumption that someone at a higher level of an agency or government will use it. But in reality, we found few examples of data uses outside of national-level reporting. The real purpose of results data seems unclear to a majority of users at every level.

In the health sector, technology is considered an important enabler for data use. In particular, DHIS2 is used in both Ghana and Tanzania to collect, manage, and report facility-based health data. **But tools like this are primarily designed for reporting, not for dynamic analysis, and analytical outputs are limited.** Many respondents call for better IT hardware and software to support data management and use. Respondents were also eager for data management and analysis tools that reach facilities and villages—not just district or provincial offices.

1. The potential of constituent feedback as a cost-effective proxy for [expensive] sub-national survey data is worth noting here.

For the few data users we encountered, data analysis is essentially an 'overtime' activity. A few intrinsically-motivated officials used or presented data in a way that influenced a program or policy, demonstrating the possible impacts when leaders and workers make better use of results-oriented data. In general, however, **incentives for using results data are absent because analysis is not required, nor explicitly recognized or rewarded.**

Results data can have a powerful effect when local decision makers analyze and communicate key results information.

In one case, a District Health Director was concerned about unusually **high maternal mortality rates in some communities within her district.** The health team used facility data from DHIMS to display and compare maternal mortality figures for each of the communities. The data were presented during a District Assembly meeting and the alarming figures **caused a stir, compelling Assembly members for those communities to take action.** Several assembly persons quickly arranged accommodation and other resources to bring new community health workers to their areas. **Health worker coverage in the district has now substantially increased,** though resulting changes in maternal mortality have not yet been assessed.

INFLUENCE OF RESULTS DATA ON POLICY AND PLANNING

We found that the **perceived value of a results indicator depends on the ability of its users to do something as a result of that data.** But there is a lack of space for data use in policy and planning at local (provincial, district) levels, as decisions are largely based on central government guidance with limited use of results. Motivation to produce and use data diminishes as users see few opportunities to use results data to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

Moreover, even where leaders are actively calling for improved results, the absence of clear and visible links between performance and funds undermines interest in results data. **Most respondents perceive little or no relationship between (a) the collection and use of data and (b) the resources they receive.**

Government decentralization efforts are underway in all three focus countries—and are common around the world—presenting both risks and opportunities for local-level results-based management. At present, updated processes for data collection and use are not fully implemented, meaning that newly-mandated local planning processes are done without resources or attention toward meaningful data. In some cases, this data vacuum means that **local political priorities take precedence over evidence.**

Yet these decentralization initiatives can still **amplify the role of results data** by creating local 'space' to use results data for local decision-making. Since currently-available results data does not yet cater to the district-level audience, calls for more disaggregated outcome data are particularly important for maximizing the influence of results data within devolved governments.

WAY FORWARD: HOW SHOULD THE DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY INVEST IN RESULTS?

To maximize the value of results data—especially for local governments—development agencies and governments should:

- **Create incentives to use results data.** New incentives to promote data use are sorely needed. Activities could include awards, prizes, or grants for exceptional cases of data and evidence use, both for governments and non-government implementers. Governments should also award high-powered data users with promotion and recognition.

- **Connect resources with results.** Disconnects between results-based plans and actual budget expenditures impede meaningful use of data and evidence. Performance contracting and similar results-based financing approaches have started to address this issue in some places. But even simply connecting data on results achieved vs. budget allocated can promote organizational cultures that value data and evidence.

- **Sponsor technologies that promote use–not just reporting.** Demand for technology is strong, but most existing technologies focus more on reporting than on analytics. Invest in tools that facilitate data exploration and analysis for non-expert users, and that reach officials at the most local levels.

- **Generate local-level outcome data.** Clear needs exist for local-level data that illustrate the real effects of programs and policies. Further disaggregating household surveys is one direct—if expensive—way to address this. Investments in civil registration and vital statistics are even more critical. But in the short term, alternative, supplementary sources of outcome-relevant data could include citizen-generated service feedback data, or data shared from NGOs and other implementers. Government leaders should encourage and normalize the use of external data for results management.

- **Identify and build up data leaders.** Train and influence government and agency leaders to prioritize results and use of data and evidence. No technical fix can add as much value as clear leadership signals that underscore the importance of results data for improving efficiency and effectiveness. Examples of effective results data use should be recognized, lauded, and disseminated by leaders.

- **Respond to local data demands.** Our respondents called for additional staff resources, improved data collection/management technology, and data-focused training. But bear in mind that staff time constraints were of greater concern than staff capacity constraints, and that effective use of data and evidence require adequate staff time and resources. Agencies and governments can further prioritize and streamline indicators to reduce reporting burdens and free up staff time for higher-value data tasks.