

Executive Summary

Background

The purpose of this program evaluation effort was to examine the value added of Partnerships (PPP) with regard to the targeted President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) goals and objectives, training, resources leveraged, and the results achieved. An external evaluation award funded by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) supported this collaborative effort and was awarded to a research team from Georgia State University, School of Public Health. The protocol and instrumentation received appropriate reviews and approvals required by the CDC clearance-including human subjects review from the Department of Global Health, the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Data Analysis Branch (MEDLAB), and by Economics and Health Services. The role of the CDC Principal Investigator was to provide the list of key stakeholders that GSU evaluators attempted to recruit for interview.

Methodology

Evaluators interviewed professionals involved in any of three PEPFAR lab-based PPPs who were identified as key stakeholders by CDC International Lab Branch team members. The evaluators conducted both in-person and telephonic interviews from April 2018 through June 2018. The purpose of the interviews was to provide an opportunity for key stakeholders to identify their insights about being engaged in a PPP to accomplish PEPFAR / UNAIDS scale up goals. The approach is innovative in that it seeks to compare issues, ideas, and concerns of stakeholders across three PPPs that have a mutual target of enhancing workforce capacity among laboratorians and the broader workforce involved in HIV control efforts in high HIV prevalence countries. Although there are many stakeholders associated with the PPPs examined in this study, this initial evaluation study targeted key stakeholders that were considered 'mid-management' level of the public, private, and corporate organizations engaged in PPP activities due to their front-line experience in active partner engagement and development/implementation of PPP-related activities.

Results

A total of 23 key stakeholders participated in interviews with the evaluation team. Qualitative data analysis revealed several themes that resonated strongly with stakeholders:

- Stakeholders detailed positive impacts derived from PPP projects. These included improved capacity of labs marked by the number of labs with increased accreditation standing; more efficient, knowledgeable staff; better clinical-patient-lab encounters; and in country-lab systems that are better maintained (in terms of supplies and equipment).

- Stakeholders identified that PPP activities improved local capacity on a number of levels-the capacity of the workforce to ensure smooth operations, to maintain better quality control within lab networks, and an enhanced capacity for country systems to more efficiently test, diagnose, and sustain treatment to control HIV.
- A theme consistently emphasized by stakeholders was that local, in-country considerations were critical to PPP success throughout a project cycle. Respondents indicated that understanding local needs is necessary at the very beginning of establishing a PPP, especially when 5-year strategic plans and goals are set. Interviewees shared that inclusion of in-country partners will enhance local stakeholder buy-in and empowerment /ownership over time. Respondents emphasized the potential that exists to utilize PPP local trainees to become trainers so new generation of local mentors are available for future training endeavors.
- Stakeholders appraised PPPs as valuable because of their flexible nature, which allows partners to leverage financial, intellectual, and logistical resources and benefits in more efficient ways than what traditional service contracts afford.
- Executive and managerial buy-in across sectors was viewed as important by stakeholders in supporting a PPP agenda from the period in which a Memorandum of Understanding is established through development of a strategic plan that accounts for shared and mutually agreed upon evaluation and reporting activities throughout a project cycle.
- Stakeholders identified that market, personnel, and funding changes threaten the stability of PPP relationships and project progress in typical project cycle.
- Stakeholders cited that unclear priorities, roles, expectations, and accountability among multi-sector partners were sources of tension that impeded progress toward attainment of PPP goals.

Conclusion

Gathering insights from key stakeholders involved in PPP activities on the front line of three projects dedicated to the same goal of lab systems strengthening provides executive leadership and other public health interests the opportunity to gain a sense of PPP project value. Enumeration of program progress, milestones, and impacts were viewed as critical for program justification, support, and renewal of PPP contracts. Support of this project emphasizes the commitment to examine keys to PEPFAR lab-based PPP success relative to achievement of UNAIDS Scale Up goals. This evaluation provides useful insights on approaches to strengthen partner engagement and information capture so that quantification of PPP impacts can be maximized.