Routine Data Quality Assessment: An Approach for Data Verification

**Background:** Data quality assurance (DQA) refers to the procedures for ensuring that Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) data are accurate, complete, consistent and reliable. Quality data are very important for accounting for results to donors, measuring progress on interventions and for evidence-based decision-making at the program level. Quality data contribute to better planning, improved program performance and better resource management. DQA cuts across all M&E activities from program design, indicator definitions, data collection methods, data entry, processing and through to reporting.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are vital components of the HIV response in Nepal. The USAID-funded ASHA Project, implemented through Family Health International and over 50 local implementing partners, systematically collects and aggregates data from specific geographic locations and reports key achievements to Nepal Government and donors. Information gathered from M&E is fed back into the program planning and implementation process in order to improve program relevance and effectiveness. Data quality control is also an essential part of the ASHA Project. In endeavoring to achieve this quality, FHI invests a great deal of effort into ensuring that the data gathered is valid, reliable, accurate, precise, and timely. As a result of this increased emphasis on the quality of data, FHI initiated data quality audits (DQA) in 2007 and these were repeated in 2008 and 2009 to track improvement in quality over time.

**DQA objectives:**

Specific objectives included:
- To review the existing system for routine data recording and reporting implemented for ASHA project.
- To assess the quality of routine data recorded and reported in light of validity, reliability, system integrity and accuracy, using the standard data quality audit tools developed by FHI and approved by USAID.
- To utilize findings in order to provide recommendations to partner organizations for improvement and maintenance of quality data collection.
- To support data management and information use for decision making processes

**Method:** A standard tool, developed by FHI and used by FHI offices globally, incorporates six different dimensions of DQA. This tool was used for assessing data quality with FHI implementing partners. It incorporates elements of M&E administration and management, validity, reliability, accuracy, timeliness, data and system integrity and data use. Partners were asked various questions in order to complete different elements of the checklist. Methods used for information collection included management interview (MI), staff interview (SI), record review (R) and observation (O). All levels of documentation related to the data of selected indicators were verified.
Results: A comparison of the 2007, 2008 and 2009 DQAs shows improvements in the area of monitoring and evaluation within country office as well as at the IA level. The average audit score was around 90% in 2009, ten percent increase from the average score in 2007. Based on the results and recommendations of the DQAs, improvements have been made to monitoring and evaluation processes and recording and reporting systems have been updated within FHI Nepal Country Office. Additionally, the computerized Management Information System has been updated and used at the partner level and all implementing partners were trained on the use of forms and formats, program indicators and definitions, and the use of MIS software for program data analysis to improve the quality of data.

Lesson Learned/Recommendation: DQA is a new initiative and used to identify issues in data quality and solutions. The process itself can be used to strengthen capacity at both the donor and partner level. Routine DQA contributes to quality improvement of data and the ability to effectively program based on sound information.