

# Measuring Agency-Level Results: Lessons Learned from Catholic Relief Services' Beneficiary and Service Delivery Indicators Initiative<sup>1</sup>

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**Background:** Many NGOs have less success documenting their results at the agency level than at the program or project level. Little has been published on the challenges NGOs face in developing and measuring agency-level results. To address this issue, InterAction, an alliance of NGOs, commissioned a comparative study that drew on the existing grey literature, and a sample of 17 InterAction member organizations through case studies and interviews.

**Purpose:** This paper builds on that InterAction study by presenting one of the first published case studies of a successful agency-level measurement (ALM) system – Catholic Relief Services' (CRS') Beneficiary and Service Delivery Indicators (BSDI) initiative.

**Setting:** A faith-based multi-national relief and development NGO.

**Intervention:** N/A

**Research Design:** A case study approach was used to describe and document the development of the CRS ALM.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** The information in this study is derived primarily from CRS files and documents. Data reflecting ALM practices in other NGOs were derived from the 17 InterAction member NGOs. Data reflecting the ALM practices developed by specific NGOs and presented in tabular form in the paper were derived from official documents published by those NGOs.

**Findings:** The authors discuss key lessons for other large and small organizations to consider when developing their own ALM systems.

**Keywords:** *agency-level results (ALR); agency-level measurement (ALM); monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL); monitoring and evaluation; non-governmental organization (NGO); agency-wide metrics; results-based planning and reporting; Catholic Relief Services (CRS)*

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## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, and owing to the formulation of new evaluation policies among major development donors<sup>3</sup>, non-governmental organizations (NGOs)<sup>4</sup> have increased the rigor with which they monitor and evaluate the development investments they execute. Consequently, they are increasingly able to provide solid evidence<sup>5</sup> of the effectiveness of their projects and program-level investments. While this has helped demonstrate the success of individual projects, NGOs have been less successful in demonstrating the difference they are making overall as organizations.

To address this issue, the NGO umbrella organization InterAction, through its Evaluation and Program Effectiveness Working Group, commissioned a comparative survey of the experiences of 17 InterAction member organizations through case studies and interviews. The subsequent report, published in May 2016, provides a comparative analysis of what motivated these NGOs to create different systems<sup>6</sup> for measuring agency-level results, the expectations and assumptions associated with different agency-level measurement (ALM) systems, and “what it takes to build and maintain them [the ALM systems], their use, key challenges, benefits, risks, tradeoffs, and costs” (Levine, van Vijefeiijke, & Jayawickrama, 2016, p. 6). Based on the analysis, the report offers a series of recommendations to help NGOs decide if agency-level measurement makes sense for them and, if so, how to develop an ALM system that meets their needs (Levine, van Vijefeiijke, & Jayawickrama, 2016, p. 6).

This article builds on that InterAction White Paper by developing one of the first published case studies of a successful system for tracking agency-wide results in a major international NGO, Catholic Relief Services (CRS). In any given year, CRS implements projects in more than 100 countries with over 1,000 local partners. In 2012, CRS created its own ALM system, the Beneficiary and Service Delivery Indicators (BSDI) initiative. By 2015, BSDI was tracking and reporting information on 107.3 million total beneficiaries—42.7 direct and 64.7 indirect—across 79 countries and 10 program areas. In 2015, CRS made BSDI a mandatory monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) function in the agency’s first agency-wide MEAL strategy (CRS, 2015).

This article describes the process CRS used to develop the BSDI-based ALM system. **Section One – Background** provides a brief overview of the external and internal pressures placed on international NGOs like CRS to create new systems for measuring agency-wide results and some of the problems that NGOs have encountered in developing them. **Section Two – Approach and Methods of the BSDI Process** describes the activities CRS conducted and the challenges it encountered in each year (2012 to 2015), highlighting the evolution of BSDI methods and process development. **Section Three – Results of the BSDI Initiative** briefly describes the results of the BSDI initiative each year. The paper concludes in **Section Four – Discussion of the Value of the BSDI Initiative and Lessons Learned**, examining the utility of the BSDI data produced each year (2012-2015), and then describes potential next steps in BSDI development. Section Four ends with a description

<sup>2</sup>The authors have used several acronyms throughout this paper. Each are spelled out where they first appear in the paper. For reference the following acronyms are used in the paper: Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), agency-level results (ALR), agency-level measurement (ALM), monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Beneficiary and Service Delivery Indicators (BSDI), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), information, communication, and technology (ICT), headquarters (HQ), Agricultural Cooperative Development International - Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance (ACDI-VOCA), International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Lutheran World Relief (LWR), fiscal year (FY), and partnership and capacity strengthening (PCS).

<sup>3</sup> Some key examples of donor evaluation policies include the *USAID Evaluation Policy* of 2011 (USAID, 2011) and

the US Department of Agriculture’s *Monitoring and Evaluation Policy* of 2013 (US Department of Agriculture, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> An example of this effect on NGOs is described in the 2016 InterAction paper titled *Measuring International NGO Agency-Level Results* (Levine, van Vijefeiijke, & Jayawickrama, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> An example of this increased level of rigor in NGO evaluation evidence is described in the 2014 article titled *Measuring Results in Development: The Role of Impact Evaluation, in Agency-wide Performance Measurement Systems* (Manning, R. & White, H., 2014).

<sup>6</sup> In this article, *system* refers to the overall approach towards agency-level measurement that an NGO chooses, not just the information technology (IT) systems that support the approach” (Levine, van Vijefeiijke, & Jayawickrama, 2016, p. 5).

of cross-cutting lessons learned and recommendations for other development institutions that may consider the creation of their own ALM systems.

## Background

### *Macro Trends Driving NGOs to Adopt Agency-Level Measurement Systems*

*Development of viable and rigorous quantitative methodologies for evaluation.* During the last two decades of the twentieth century, the general approaches to project evaluation in the relief and development world were qualitative in nature, with technical experts visiting project sites, making observations, conducting interviews, and then reporting on their impressions. The general perception from both the donors and the NGOs charged with executing donor-funded programs was that evaluations were a mere reporting requirement. They were often of low quality and the data were seldom used to inform the design or execution of new or existing field-level programs.<sup>7</sup>

Between 2000 and 2004 a series of studies were published documenting some of the benefits of moving beyond the traditional qualitative-based evaluation methodologies and embracing more powerful and rigorous quantitative methods.<sup>8</sup> These studies set in motion an inter and intra-agency reflection process that revolutionized donor standards for evaluation in all of the major aid agencies.<sup>9</sup> These new standards pushed aid agencies to use more rigorous, statistically-based

research methodologies in order to draw more complex yet valid conclusions about program results, and attribute those results to relief and development programs with higher levels of confidence.

*Agencies start to adopt more rigorous standards for evaluation.* The first institutional response to this emerging demand for higher-quality impact evaluations was the 2004 establishment of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, an independent US foreign aid agency. *Results and transparency* were identified as two of its foundational pillars. The organization was committed to rigorous methodologies with ample budgets to evaluate its development investments (Lucas, 2011). By January of 2011, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) had formulated a comprehensive evaluation policy requiring rigorous evaluation methodologies for all project evaluations. The USAID Evaluation Policy became the model for project evaluation methods in other US government agencies such as the United States Department of Agriculture (United States Department of Agriculture, 2011; United States Department of Agriculture, 2013).

*Creation of new entities promoting more rigorous evaluations.* The major aid agencies' decision to promote more rigorous evaluation standards spawned, and was spawned by, a variety of new entities developing higher-level methodologies for project evaluation, which further reinforced the trend toward more rigorous evaluation standards for international donor assistance.<sup>10</sup> Two

<sup>7</sup> In 2010, with his public announcement of the new "USAID FORWARD Reform Agenda," the newly installed United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator Rajiv Shah candidly described USAID's previous evaluation approach in these terms: "Often, what passes for evaluation follows a two-two-two model. Two contractors spending two weeks abroad conducting two dozen interviews. For about \$30,000 they produce a report that no one needs and no one reads. And the results they claim often have little grounding in fact." (USAID, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> One example was the release of a pilot evaluation research study of a conditional cash transfer project in Mexico named PROGRESA, the overall objective of which was to increase school enrollment. This study, conducted by the Mexican Ministry of Finance in 2000, used a randomized control trial pilot to test the project's hypothesis, "the pilot demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that such a program does substantially increase school enrollment...This was one of the first demonstrations of the persuasive power of a successful randomized experiment" (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> A pivotal event was the widespread publication of the landmark 2004 Center for Global Development's report, *When Will We Ever Learn: Improving Lives Through Impact Evaluation*. This report became popularly known as the Evaluation Gap Report (Savedoff, Levine, & Birdsall, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> (a) The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab was founded at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2003, "to support the use of randomized evaluations, to train others in rigorous scientific evaluation methods, and to encourage policy changes based on results of randomized evaluations" (Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab at the Massachusetts Institute for Technology, 2016).

(b) The Network of Networks for Impact Evaluation (NONIE) was founded by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee's (DAC's) "Measuring for Development Results" Working Group in 2006. "NONIE is comprised of the OECD/ DAC Evaluation Network, the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), the Evaluation Cooperation Group (ECG), and the

organizations—the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab at the Massachusetts Institute for Technology and the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)—played a critical role (through methodological training and funding, respectively) in helping NGOs adapt their evaluation practices to these new donor standards.

*Creation of standard indicators and their adoption by donors.* By the turn of the millennium, most international aid and relief donors had adopted a series of standard indicators that were required of all their projects to measure the *outputs* (the concrete products or processes generated by a development investment) and higher-level *outcomes* (the impact generated by the donor investments). These typically included standardized definitions and data collection methods for each indicator to ensure their comparability. Once the indicators were adopted by the projects that a given donor funded, it could then compare the performance of different projects delivering the same types of interventions, thus raising the bar of methodological rigor.

Once the standard indicator lists were in place for different categories of donor projects, they set the stage for the creation of the agency-level measurement systems for the major bilateral and multilateral aid donors. These trailblazing initiatives in ALM among donors pointed the way for NGOs to similarly measure agency-wide results.

One of the first ALM systems grew out of the announcement of the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS of its “Core National Set of HIV/AIDS Indicators” in 2008.<sup>11</sup> This indicator list provided the initial foundation for the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) initiative and its *Next Generation of Indicators*,

which were announced in 2013 (PEPFAR, 2013). The PEPFAR standard indicators were supported by standardized data collection tools for use by all implementing partners, donor agencies, and other stakeholders implementing PEPFAR-funded HIV/AIDS programs. They allowed PEPFAR to systematically measure not only the performance of each PEPFAR project but, at the aggregate level, USAID’s agency-level HIV/AIDS results.

At about the same time the PEPFAR indicators were introduced, the Foreign Assistance Standard (“F”) Indicators were developed by the U.S. State Department for use across the full range of USAID and State Department projects (USAID, 2008). The USAID Office of Food for Peace and the Feed the Future presidential initiative (Food Assistance and Nutrition Technical Assistance, 1999 and Feed the Future, 2013 respectively) programs also developed their own standard ALM systems. These allowed for the aggregation of performance data by program and yielded performance measurement across projects at the agency-level for those Food for Peace and Feed the Future funded projects.

*Increased donor pressure to show accountability.* Another factor that increased the pressure on donors to track agency-level results was the drive to increase donor transparency and accountability in response to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005.<sup>12</sup> The Paris Declaration, ratified by over 100 countries, outlined five principles that make aid more effective: ownership, alignment, harmonization, managing for results, and mutual accountability. Donors and partners (developing countries) were expected to respect these principles in the management of their development investments (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development’s

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International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE)—a network drawn from the regional evaluation associations.” The stated mission of NONIE is “By sharing methodological approaches and promoting learning by doing on impact evaluations, NONIE aims to promote the use of this more specific approach by its members within their larger portfolio of evaluations” (Leeuw & Vaessen, 2009, p. ix).

(c) The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), founded in 2008 funds impact evaluations and systematic reviews that generate evidence on what works in development programs and why (International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), 2016).

(d) The Development Impact Evaluation Initiative (DIME) was created by the Independent Evaluation Group in the World Bank “To increase the use of impact evaluation (IE) in the design and implementation of public policy, to (i) improve development projects and public policy to deliver better outcomes, (ii) strengthen

country institutions for evidence-based policy making and (iii) generate knowledge in strategic development areas” (World Bank, 2016, p. 1).

<sup>11</sup> These indicators were established by the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS’ Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group (MERG) and endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS in 2010 and refined in the 2012 *Global AIDS Response Reporting Guidelines*. (United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> The principles outlined in Paris Declaration were amplified and re-affirmed in its subsequent High Level Fora on Aid Effectiveness with the Accra Agenda for Action (in 2008) and in Busan (in 2012) which produced the Busan Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee, 2016).

Development Assistance Committee, n.d.). Once these agreements were adopted, the ability to concretely demonstrate an agency's compliance with the recommended principles for aid accountability became critical to gaining and/or maintaining funding. In 2010, USAID and the U.S. State Department contracted an evaluation of U.S. compliance with the Paris Declaration principles on aid effectiveness (Social Impact, 2011). Since then, USAID has reached out to its NGO implementing entities asking for concurrent compliance, particularly with the accountability principle. To further oversee and promote NGO accountability in the use of not-for-profit relief and development agency funds, NGO umbrella organizations and watchdog entities have been formed.<sup>13</sup>

*Reinforcing trends in information, communication, and technology.* NGOs' willingness and ability to execute this type of rigorous ALM system was reinforced by the dramatic improvements in their information, communication, and technology (ICT) systems since 2001.<sup>14</sup> These ICT advances have added to the demand for aggregated performance data across NGO projects to measure agency-level results.

*Early NGO Experiences with the Measurement of Agency-Level Results.* The same external pressures that prompted the major donors to adopt more rigorous evaluation methods and standard performance indicators for their projects also put pressure on the leadership of several major international NGOs to demand the creation of new

systems for measuring their agency-level results in the key areas where they intervened. The NGOs recognized the value of measuring agency-wide results for:

- Reporting to NGO donors and stakeholders on agency performance;
- Public communications on NGO services delivered and beneficiaries reached;
- General country and program performance measures for program management at headquarters, regional, and country levels;
- New business development in terms of showing agency capacity to deliver services, reaching beneficiaries against targets, and justifying the new proposal targets on beneficiaries to be reached and services to be delivered; and
- Enhancing accountability and transparency to donors, project participants, and their communities (Levine, van Vijefeijske, & Jayawickrama, 2016, pp. 7-9).

In contrast to the conscious and purposeful uptake and adoption of the new standards for project-level evaluation by almost all the major US NGOs, there were very few examples of NGOs that were able to implement successful agency-level measurement systems for two reasons. The first challenge that NGOs face in measuring agency-wide results is that typically these institutions intervene in multiple countries with multiple projects in each country, with many working across multiple sectors.

<sup>13</sup> These agencies include: (a) The Charity Navigator (founded in 2001), which "works to guide intelligent giving... to advance a more efficient and responsive philanthropic marketplace, in which givers and the charities they support work in tandem to overcome... the world's most persistent challenges (through transparent publication of)...the three (crucial) dimensions of a charity's operations: Financial Health, Accountability & Transparency and Results Reporting" (Charity Navigator, 2016).

(b) The International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) (created in 2008), which was founded on the principle that "Developing countries face huge challenges in accessing up-to-date information about aid, development, and humanitarian flows... [and] citizens in developing countries and in donor countries lack the information they need to hold their governments accountable for the use of those resources. IATI ...makes information about aid spending easier to access, use, and understand." (International Aid Transparency Initiative, 2016).

(c) The Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation from the Busan Agreement of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee members (created in 2011), which "offers a global mechanism to ensure co-operation is based on Busan principles of ownership, results, inclusiveness; and transparency and accountability to deliver tangible results on the post-2015 agenda (by) tracking progress in the implementation of Busan commitments for more effective development co-operation, through its monitoring framework comprised of 10 indicators" (Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Many of these ICT initiatives were encouraged by NetHope, an NGO formed in 2001 as a partnership of "the world's largest nonprofits with technology innovators worldwide (to) act as a catalyst for productive collaboration, innovation, and problem-solving to reimagine how technology can improve our world" (NetHope, 2016).

Table 1  
Illustrative Agency-Level Measurement Systems at the Outcome Results Level

Agency	System Name	System Status To Date
<b>Discontinued Systems</b>		
Mercy Corps	Mission Metrics	Ended—operated 2010 to 2013
World Vision International	Transformational Development Indicators	Ended—operated 2003 to 2008
Oxfam/UK	Effectiveness Reviews	Remain in practice but in revised form after two modifications
<b>Systems Still in Practice</b>		
Agricultural Cooperative Development International - Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance (ACDI-VOCA)	iSMART—for Food for Peace projects only	Field tested in 2014 (Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, and Liberia) current practice is uncertain and unconfirmed
Pact	Global Measures – Mainly output indicators	Started in 2011 and continually reported through 2015
Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE International)	Asia Impact Report—Asia region only	One report on 2005 to 2010 period and not updated. Current practice unconfirmed

Sources: (a) Rugh, Pechi, & Nkwake, 2008; (b) Mercy Corps, 2014; (c) Hughes & Hutchings, 2011; (d) Pact, 2012; (e) CARE International, 2011.

The second is the difficulty in determining which level of agency-wide results to measure—that is to say whether to measure at the level of:

- A lower-level *output indicator*, referring to the concrete products or processes generated by a development investment—like number of emergency shelter kits delivered or number of health workers trained; or
- A higher-level *outcome indicator*, measuring the impact generated by NGO or donor investments—like higher income or improvements in health status. Although outcome indicators are obviously the most interesting and meaningful agency-level results, they are also the most difficult to measure. One reason is that results across NGO projects in different sectors are not always comparable due to the use of different indicators and indicator definitions. If an NGO decides to require implementation of a specific set of outcome indicators, this would require its projects to collect and analyze additional data beyond what would be required by the projects' donors. Since the donor is paying for these monitoring and evaluation activities as part of a grant or contract—and usually approves any project-specific monitoring and evaluation plan, including the project's indicators—these supplementary data gathering actions might

even catalyze a certain amount of donor push-back if this was perceived as interfering with or duplicating the donor-mandated tracking systems. Even if an NGO persists in pursuing the goal of tracking its own internal outcome indicators at its own expense, it would have to start from scratch at the agency level in designing its own ALM since there are few successful models of outcome-level ALMs to replicate.

*Outcome-level agency-wide management systems.* Not surprisingly, two of the first NGO pioneers in ALM systems—Mercy Corps and World Vision International—focused at the higher level of project outcomes. Both NGOs suspended their pilot initiatives, however, after only a few years, as seen in Table 1.

To date, the most successful NGOs to launch ALM systems at the outcome level—Agricultural Cooperative Development International-Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance (ACDI-VOCA), Pact, and the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) International—have restricted their data collection and analysis to certain geographic regions or certain key NGO thematic or strategic areas (see Table 1). After two attempts at developing an ALM system at the outcome level, referred to in Table 1 as its Effectiveness Reviews, Oxfam/UK has

modified its approach to the conduct of in-depth evaluations of Oxfam projects selected on the basis of a periodic agency-wide summary review of agency-wide output-level results.

*Output-oriented agency-level management systems.* In general, the NGOs developing agency-wide metrics that focus on lower-level outputs or service coverage have been more successful in terms of continuation and periodic refinement. Table 2 highlights the progress made in terms of output-oriented agency-level measurement systems. Three of the most successful output systems were created by Save the Children, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and Lutheran World Relief (LWR). All three systems focus on tracking the number of direct beneficiaries; two of the three track indirect beneficiaries as well. All three of the successful output-oriented systems are still in practice.

## Approach and Methods of the BSDI Process

### *Initial Dialogue with CRS Leadership for Establishing an ALM System*

In November 2010, the CRS Senior Executive Vice President for Overseas Operations asked the monitoring and evaluation department to report to him on the feasibility of establishing an ALM system on the operational effectiveness of CRS in delivering its then-nine program area services (Text Box 1).

A month later two Monitoring and Evaluation Senior Advisors reported back that at the HQ level, CRS' monitoring and evaluation department did not have the capacity to produce agency-wide

results at either the outcome or output level. Specifically, they reported that the agency had no program data in a central data bank on commonly-defined beneficiary categories, sector interventions, or services delivered (output data), nor any consolidated data or lessons learned from CRS' program evaluation findings (outcome data). (Carr and Sharrock)

Based on this initial assessment, the CRS monitoring and evaluation team recommended that CRS focus on developing an ALM system for collecting output and service coverage indicators before moving to the more advanced collection and analysis of outcome indicators. The idea was to start small and refine the system over time. With that in mind, it was decided to track beneficiaries and the services they receive from CRS.

### *Developing and Testing the BSDI Process (2011-2014)*

*Rapid beneficiary survey.* A rapid beneficiary survey, the first step of the BSDI initiative, was conducted between January and March 2011 over all CRS projects in all regions. It asked country program staff to report the number of fiscal year (FY) 2010 beneficiaries for each of its active projects.<sup>15</sup> The purpose of the rapid survey was simply to test the extent to which beneficiary data in any form were kept by CRS projects and to assess their level of quality. The request for data and the guidance for its reporting emanated from the CRS Senior Executive Vice President for Overseas Operations, with the hope that the organizational level from which the request was made would ensure the careful and timely attention of country program and project staff.

The CRS Senior Executive Vice President expressed frustration at the agency's inability to show agency donors and peer organizations what CRS does and how it performs. He pointed to the 2009 CRS Annual Report on his desk and said that other than financial data, the only performance measure was 'number of beneficiaries reached.' It was a nice round number in the millions and he was concerned as to how the number was calculated, how up-to-date it was, and how the CRS beneficiaries reported on were defined. He harkened back to his time as a CRS Country Representative and how even at that level he would have liked to be able to talk with local peer organizations, CRS implementing partners, and USAID mission staff about CRS agency-level performance. Moreover, CRS did not have meaningful data on CRS performance at the program-area level for its business development activities. (Carr, 2015, p. 1).

Text Box 1. Internal Pressure from the CRS Administration to Develop an Agency-Level Measurement System

<sup>15</sup> CRS's fiscal year begins on October 1<sup>st</sup> and ends on September 30<sup>th</sup> each year.

Table 2  
Illustrative Agency-Level Measurement Systems at the Output Results Level

Agency	System Name	Coverage	System Status To Date
Save the Children	Total Reach	Direct and indirect beneficiaries by all Save programmatic areas	2011 – still in practice
International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)	Federation-Wide Databank and Reporting System (FDRS)	Direct beneficiaries of all IFRC programmatic areas	2010 and refined in 2013– still in practice,
Lutheran World Relief (LWR)	LWR by the Numbers	Direct and indirect beneficiaries other coverage measures in 5 LWR programmatic areas	2013 – still in practice

Sources: (a) LWR, 2015; (b) Save the Children, 2013; (c) IFRC, 2013.

By May 2011, the Monitoring and Evaluation Senior Advisors were able to say, in a one-page status report: “A Rapid Beneficiary Survey was conducted in all seven CRS regions requesting number of beneficiaries for projects active in FY2010 by program area. CRS has the field capacity to generate beneficiary data” (Carr & Sharrock, 2011). Moreover, the quality of the data reported, as measured by the extent to which (1) the data were estimated in rounded numbers, (2) the data represented proposed project targets rather than actual beneficiaries, (3) the data were repeated or (4) the data were missing, was surprisingly high, as was the completeness of the data.

*Research across peer organizations.* CRS research across peer agencies to identify similar ALM systems being conducted by other NGOs took place

between June and December of 2011. Save the Children was found to have the most comparable system with its Total Reach practice to count direct and indirect beneficiaries over its two thematic areas and their eight sub-thematic areas. Similarly, IFRC was collecting direct beneficiary data only for its three program areas, also starting in 2011, as shown in Table 2.

*Initial elaboration of BSDI indicators and catalogue of CRS services.* Elaboration of *The Catalogue of CRS Services and Beneficiary Definitions* (henceforth referred to as the Catalogue) began in July 2011 through a series of meetings in CRS HQ with the Senior Technical Advisors for the then-nine program areas. CRS program areas are generally very broad programmatic categories.<sup>16</sup>

#### FY2011-2012

- September 2011 in the Central African Region – Two M&E advisors visited five projects in three countries (Carr, 2011)
- November 2011 in the East and Southern Asia Region – One M&E advisor visited two emergency responses in two Asia region countries (Hagens, 2011)
- March 2012 in the West Africa Region – Two M&E advisors visited three projects in three countries (Carr, 2012a)
- May 2012 in the Latin America and Caribbean Region – One M&E advisor visited six projects in four countries (Carr, 2012b)
- September 2012 in West Africa Region for the BSDI Sahel Crisis Pilot Monitoring – Two M&E advisors visited four emergency responses in three countries (Carr, 2012)

#### FY2014

- August 2014 in the East and Southern Asia Region – Two M&E advisors visited 3 projects in 2 program areas in India (Carr, 2014)

Text Box 2. BSDI Field-Validation Visits, FYs 2011-2012 and 2014

<sup>16</sup> The then-nine program areas were: agriculture, water and sanitation, education, emergency, microfinance, health, HIV/AIDS, peacebuilding, and safety net.

It was essential that beneficiaries tracked at the project level through BSDI be grouped in consistently defined program areas, i.e. that beneficiaries reported under a program area for a given project in one country receive the same benefits as beneficiaries reported in that area in another. The objective of the on-going Senior Technical Advisor meetings was to break each program area down and identify major sub-categories of activities (service areas) within each program area. These meetings extended over several months and were iterative, with each building on and refining the service areas identified earlier. The Catalogue also described illustrative service recipients who could be considered direct and indirect beneficiaries of each service.

By September 2011, the service areas in the Catalogue were developed sufficiently to test them in the field. The objectives of the field visits were:

- “To validate program and sub-program area benefits and beneficiary definitions; and
- To understand current data collection processes for collecting benefit and beneficiary data by programmatic area” (Carr , 2011).

*Field validation of the BSDI indicators.* Field validation visits were conducted to corroborate the service areas identified under each program area of the Catalogue, the beneficiary definitions for each service area shown in the Catalogue, and to ensure that the anticipated BSDI data-gathering methods would be consistent with, and not more onerous than, methods currently conducted in the field. In September and November 2011, the first two field validation studies were conducted in five countries in Central Africa and Asia. Three additional field validation studies were conducted in March, May, and September of 2012, in nine countries in West Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. During these validation trips, two-person teams visited both development projects and emergency responses.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> It was important to validate the Catalogue in both development and emergency settings since each have their own nuances. For example, in development projects, teams often use more sophisticated and established systems to track beneficiaries over time, while often in emergency settings, collecting beneficiary data has unique challenges given the fast-paced nature of the work where teams may not have established systems. Additionally, there are some unique characteristics of emergency beneficiaries—for example, indirect emergency beneficiaries were hard for the field to

*Emergency pilot test in west Africa region.* The 2012 trip to West Africa permitted the team to pilot BSDI in emergencies projects in five Sahel Crisis countries, test the proposed methodology for beneficiary data gathering, and report data to a special site established in the internal CRS Global website. Altogether, the field validation exercises covered 23 CRS projects or responses in 16 countries (Text Box 2).

### *Early Evolution of the BSDI Initiative (2012)*

*First beneficiary data collection as an annual CRS exercise.* During FY12, a request for beneficiary data was made by the agency’s President. The BSDI initiative had been piloted but not yet tested or rolled out in a wider set of country programs or regions. Because the data were requested by the President/CEO—it being her first year in office reporting to the Board, and because the Board was due to meet in March—the first year of agency-wide BSDI implementation consisted of a rapid data collection process between January 8 and February 28, 2013.<sup>18</sup> This first data collection exercise was somewhat frantic and not without its flaws or challenges, but it served the critical role of kick-starting what was to become the annually conducted BSDI end-of-year beneficiary reporting exercise.

During the two-month data collection period, all projects and emergency responses active during FY2012 were asked to report the number of CRS direct and indirect beneficiaries by official program area.<sup>19</sup> Beneficiaries of multi-sector projects, receiving services in more than one program area, were to be counted within each program area for which they received a service.

To collect the data, the HQ MEAL staff worked with the finance team to quickly build a place in CRS’ existing eBudget financial reporting system for receiving, storing, and aggregating beneficiary data. Building onto the already-established and familiar eBudget system was seen as a simple, if intermediate, solution for data collection.

identify, and in many cases there were no indirect beneficiaries as per guidance from one emergency donor, the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). Interestingly, it was also found that OFDA defined its direct beneficiaries for similar projects in different countries in different ways.

<sup>18</sup> The data that were collected represented the beneficiaries served during FY2012.

<sup>19</sup> Often large emergency responses that have multiple funding sources are further broken down by CRS into projects within an emergency response.

As data were reported in eBudget, they were reviewed for data quality, particularly for rounded beneficiary numbers, missing data (where direct beneficiaries were reported with no indirect beneficiary data), and repeated numbers within a project and between its donor-source project numbers (DSPN),<sup>20</sup>. Where there were questionable data, clarification or explanation was requested of the relevant country programs. This process of data validation was particularly valuable with reported indirect beneficiaries, which did not always match estimated ratios of direct-to-indirect beneficiaries. Where data were questioned and clarifications given, a record of the correspondence was kept. This record was especially helpful in identifying where the guidance for data reporting was particularly unclear and needed improvement. It also was useful for determining which types of indirect beneficiaries were particularly hard for the field staff to define.

### *Establishing the CRS Beneficiary Reporting Process (2013)*

Using the lessons learned from two test beneficiary data collection exercises, the HQ MEAL team set its sights on formulating a clear set of BSDI data collection and reporting guidance materials for FY2013.

As part of the agency's post-FY2012 end-of-year-reporting analysis, senior leadership concluded that there was value in the BSDI process and it should be implemented with the FY2013 reporting process, but that its effectiveness was severely weakened by the inaccuracy in its counting of indirect beneficiaries. So, between April and June of 2013, the illustrative definitions for the indirect beneficiaries in the Catalogue of CRS Services and Beneficiary Definitions were refined in close consultation with the Senior Technical Advisors of all program areas.<sup>21</sup>

Three key activities were identified as priorities in preparation for FY2013 beneficiary reporting:

- Developing better methods for counting the beneficiaries who benefit from partner capacity strengthening;

- Strengthening the definitions of direct and indirect beneficiaries in the Catalogue; and
- Integrating BSDI reporting into the annual agency reporting process.

*Counting the beneficiaries of partner capacity strengthening services.* Like most large development agencies, CRS works through local partners. It executes the vast majority of its projects through an often pre-existing system of local partners in each country where it intervenes.<sup>22</sup> In preparation for the FY2013 end-of-year beneficiary reporting exercise, the HQ MEAL team began grappling with the question of how best to count the beneficiaries of the local partners who receive capacity strengthening services.

In FY2012, the definition of who to count was limited to traditionally-defined project beneficiaries, for example “number of farmers who receive agricultural training.” It quickly became clear that that definition – people who receive demonstrable benefits from a CRS project – was too narrow to include capacity strengthening as a program area. CRS holds its role of strengthening the capacity of its implementing partners as a crucial part of its mission. Indeed, within the then-current “From Hope to Harvest” Agency Strategy for 2014-2018, “partner collaboration and support” was identified as the first of what CRS recognized as its five core competencies. Therefore, it became necessary to refine the BSDI understanding of institutional capacity strengthening to reflect and include the CRS model of working with and through implementing partners. It was at this point that the HQ MEAL staff began collaborating with the CRS Partnership and Capacity Strengthening Unit (PCS Unit). The aim of this partnership was to better develop guidance and definitions for strengthening the capacity of project beneficiaries on the one hand, and partner beneficiaries on the other. This allowed establishment of the beneficiary criteria for three key modalities of implementing partner capacity strengthening (CRS, 2013b, pp. 7-9):

- “Capacity Building: Participants in trainings, workshops, conferences, and or other learning events;

<sup>20</sup> A donor source project number is an eleven-digit cost code that captures the donor source (who is paying), which country the project is taking place, and the type of activity being conducted within that account. An individual project has at least one donor source project number, and most projects have multiple.

<sup>21</sup> “It is important to note that not all of what CRS does is in the nature of a tangible benefit of some kind delivered to an identifiable beneficiary. Some projects deliver

policy advocacy services, for example, or ‘community empowerment’ or environmental protection programs for which there are often no immediate identifiable beneficiaries” (CRS, 2013b, p. 4).

<sup>22</sup> CRS’s local partners are comprised of a variety of institutions, ranging from private-sector, public-sector, and non-profit organizations. CRS works locally with both Catholic Church and non-church partners.

- **Institutional Strengthening:** Recipients of technical assistance services (onsite and/or remotely) aimed at strengthening systems, work processes, and procedures in the local partner’s institution/organization; and
- **Accompaniment:** Participants in coaching, mentoring, and on-the-job training in on-going and short-term activities.”

Based on this collaboration, the MEAL and PCS Units decided that a tenth program area called “capacity strengthening for partners” would be included in the BSDI Catalogue, and that an additional service area called “capacity strengthening for partners” would be embedded into each existing program area. Within these new categories, projects could report capacity strengthening services provided to partners, which did not only include the local Catholic charities in each country (or *Caritas*) but also other CRS partners as well—local NGOs, civil society organizations, national and local governments, and others.

For instance, if CRS provided a training on strengthening financial systems for the local government partner, then those local government staff or volunteers who attended the training would be counted as direct beneficiaries under the capacity strengthening for partners’ program area, while the staff, volunteers, and/or board members of the partner organization who did not attend the training would be counted as indirect beneficiaries. Additionally, if partner staff/volunteers received capacity strengthening services that were specific to a particular program area (i.e. local government staff received a health training), then they would be counted under the related program area, in this case health.

*Strengthening the definitions of direct and indirect beneficiaries in the Catalogue.* FY2013 was the second year that the staff were asked to estimate the number of indirect beneficiaries as well as the direct beneficiaries. It was necessary to develop more refined definitions and guidance to train the staff associated with the different development projects and emergency responses to better count indirect beneficiaries. The new Catalogue included the illustrative definitions of indirect beneficiaries for

all service areas. As in FY2012, all data (direct and indirect beneficiaries by project donor source project number and program area) were collected through the eBudget platform.

*Integrating BSDI reporting within the annual agency reporting process.* Some program staff wanted the BSDI data updated quarterly. In the course of the first and second year, the team leaders realized that this was not practical since the data collection and validation required a great deal of oversight. Therefore, it was decided to distribute the request for BSDI reporting in conjunction with the regular end-of-year reporting package. These instructions were to be distributed at the end of August and data were due by October 31st of each year, one month after the close of the fiscal year. By consolidating the BSDI request with the requests for finances and the annual partnership request from the PCS Unit,<sup>23</sup> it reduced the number of separate requests being made to the country programs and placed the BSDI and partnership data requests in an already familiar process. From this point forward, BSDI followed a regular annual cycle that paralleled the annual financial report cycle of the agency (Text Box 3). To familiarize field staff to the BSDI process and the BSDI Catalogue and reporting guidance, an optional webinar was held for field staff by the MEAL and PCS Units. The webinar provided field staff the opportunity to ask questions and for clarifications prior to the reporting deadline.

#### *Embedding and Adopting the BSDI Initiative (2014)*

Early in FY2014, a Global MEAL Summit was held in Baltimore where 20 MEAL Advisors and staff met for one week. One of the conversations that took place during that event was a discussion on the pace at which BSDI should be expanded during FY2014 and beyond. There was a strong consensus among the MEAL Regional Technical Advisors that BSDI should be rolled out in a gradual and purposeful fashion. The MEAL HQ team decided to take the approach that the addition of new data points (such as the number of unique beneficiaries<sup>24</sup>, age, gender, and number of

<sup>23</sup> The PCS Unit was, at the same time, in the inception of developing a system to annually collect partnership data. It was clear that despite the two units having separate priorities and mandates, there was overlap between collecting beneficiary and partner data. The two units decided to package their annual reporting requests and processes together going forward. This collaboration has

remained strong for subsequent years, from FY2013 to present day, and has been seen as an example of successful cross-unit teamwork, which has embodied CRS’s “working as one agency” vision.

<sup>24</sup> Up to this point beneficiaries could be double counted across program areas; for example, if the same beneficiary received a health-related service and an

beneficiaries by service area) would be driven by demand for those data to ensure that the data being collected were reasonable and useful to the field. There was recognition that collecting any BSDI data was a new and important step for CRS, and should continue to evolve in a slow and steady way.

Three activities were identified as priorities for the coming year:

- Refining the online BSDI guidance and Catalogue;
- Creating a series of online training and support tools to help build the capacity of the field staff to collect and analyze the data; and
- Expanding the HQ-based staff to support the initiative.

*Refining the guidance and catalogue.* Based on feedback from the FY2013 reporting exercise and on lessons learned from the previous year, the online guidance and Catalogue were both refined. The HQ MEAL staff worked to simplify and condense the BSDI guidance document, and added additional examples. The Catalogue was also revisited and definitions of indirect beneficiaries were clarified further.

*Creating on-line training and support resources.* As in FY2013, a webinar was developed to provide staff with additional explanation and support beyond the guidance documents that were sent as part of the end-of-year reporting exercise. The webinar was held during the summer of 2014 to

provide field staff the opportunity to ask questions about the guidance and Catalogue. The webinar was recorded for those who were not able to participate during the early summer months. One of the innovations introduced in the collection of FY2014 data was the establishment of a help desk through a shared email account directed to the HQ MEAL and PCS teams. And as a further source of guidance for the field in the collection of FY2014 data, the HQ MEAL team also created an online BSDI Orientation Module, which consisted of a 20-minute orientation to BSDI aimed at new CRS field staff. The module was translated to French and Spanish and made available to all staff to view.

*Hiring more staff.* Implementing these improvements was eased with the addition of a new staff member, a MEAL Specialist, to support the day-to-day implementation of BSDI. As of the middle of FY2014, the BSDI initiative was managed by one MEAL Advisor and one MEAL Specialist with support from one partnership and capacity strengthening staff. BSDI was not their sole job responsibility, but for these three staff members, the BSDI workload, depending on the time of year, took between approximately 5-40% of their time depending on the phase of data reporting. The additional staff support made a huge difference in terms of the team's ability to introduce a host of new online training options.

<p><b>August 30:</b> BSDI guidance package is sent to the field as part of finance's end-of-year package</p> <p><b>October 31:</b> Deadline for BSDI submission (reporting for the previous FY – which runs from October 1<sup>st</sup> to September 30<sup>th</sup>)</p> <p><b>November-January:</b> Data validation and cleaning (back and forth between HQ MEAL and field MEAL staff)</p> <p><b>February:</b> Submission of final data to the executive leadership team and Board</p> <p><b>March-July:</b> Reflection, decision making for the next year, and ongoing revision of BSDI guidance and materials (CRS, 2013).</p>
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Text Box 3. Annual BSDI Reporting Schedule, FY2013

### *Integrating and Socializing of the BDSI Initiative into the CRS MEAL (2015)*

agriculture service, they would be counted under both health and agriculture. However, beneficiaries were not to be counted more than once within a particular program area. For example, if the same beneficiary received two health related services—a malaria net and a training on child nutrition—that beneficiary was to be counted only once under the health program area. With the adoption of a unique beneficiary identifier CRS would be able to count both people receiving benefits in more

In FY2015, two key shifts occurred within the agency that significantly and positively affected BSDI. First, a soft launch of the CRS MEAL Policies and Procedures occurred.<sup>25</sup> The MEAL Policies and

than one program area as well as people who receive at least one CRS project benefit. Thus, double counting would be detected.

<sup>25</sup> During the soft launch, or grace period, the MEAL Policies and Procedures and supporting materials were made available to teams. The soft launch lasted one year, during which time country program teams had the chance to become familiar with the MEAL Policies and Procedures and bring their teams into compliance prior

Procedures consists of eight policies and 29 procedures that set a minimum required standard of MEAL practice for all projects and emergency responses across the agency. One of the 29 procedures, Procedure 2.3, states: “CRS staff capture and transmit beneficiary and service delivery data annually according to agency standards, definitions and processes.”<sup>26</sup> While the MEAL Policies and Procedures was soft launched in FY2015 in order to familiarize staff with the requirements and supporting materials, the effective date for the MEAL Policies and Procedures was the beginning of FY2016 (October 2015), at which point it would become an auditable procedure for projects starting in that fiscal year. By incorporating BSDI as an auditable MEAL procedure, the importance of BSDI compliance was reinforced.

Second, a new performance management information system called Gateway was launched during FY2015. This system is an online, agency-wide platform that houses all project information and makes it possible to link BSDI data to other project information, including proposals, major reports, financial information, and information on partners.<sup>27</sup> As Gateway was being developed, the MEAL team saw a clear opportunity to upgrade BSDI beneficiary reporting from eBudget.

The MEAL team identified five activities as priorities for FY2015:

- Building the BSDI data entry interface into Gateway and familiarizing staff with the new Gateway system;
- Developing customized dashboards to display real-time (annual) BSDI data;

- Requesting teams to report on an additional indicator—the service areas covered by each project;
- Refining the BSDI guidance and Catalogue; and;
- Refining the systems for counting the beneficiaries of capacity building through local partners.

*Switching to Gateway for the BSDI data platform.*

A BSDI data entry interface was built into Gateway, which required a three-month iterative design process. During FY2015, the HQ-level MEAL staff developed and tested additional guidance and a JobAid<sup>28</sup> for the field-based staff on how to enter data into Gateway. Since most MEAL and programmatic staff had access to Gateway, they were able to submit their data without relying on the financial staff as they previously had to using eBudget.

*Creating customizable reports and dashboards to display data.*

While the FY2015 data were being entered and validated, the HQ-level MEAL team was also working with the Gateway team to create a series of simple and customizable dashboards to display the FY2015 BSDI data. This involved a separate process that took between three and four months. With the dashboards and reports,<sup>29</sup> the BSDI data became more accessible to staff than ever before. Nearly all MEAL and program staff have access to Gateway<sup>30</sup> and are able to view BSDI results for their country, region, or at the global level. Prior to the introduction of Gateway, local and regional CRS staff had no way of conducting their own analysis of data. The switch from eBudget

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to the MEAL Policies and Procedures officially going into effect.

<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the audit trail requirement for MEAL Policies and Procedures 2.3 states that: “to demonstrate compliance, projects and emergency responses must show the following: submission of beneficiary data for a minimum set of BSDI indicators in Gateway within one month after the end of each fiscal year” (CRS, 2015, p. 2).

<sup>27</sup> “Gateway enables the agency to capture & analyze intelligence on institutional funding opportunities at different stages. It also provides a one-stop shop for information on our projects around the world, including key documents related to proposals and agreements—what CRS calls its ‘project portfolio.’ CRS staff will have access to institutional donor, partner, opportunity, proposal, project information and proposal and project documents.” (CRS, 2014a, p.2).

<sup>28</sup> Given that Gateway was a new system for all CRS staff, the JobAid was created by the HQ MEAL team to provide a step-by-step guide on submitting BSDI data into Gateway. The purpose of the JobAid was to explain which

data were being requested, how to navigate to the records within Gateway where BSDI information is housed, and how to enter and edit BSDI data. The JobAid also provides screen shots with clear steps to show staff exactly how to enter data. Before disseminating the JobAid, it was tested and reviewed by several field staff to ensure its usefulness.

<sup>29</sup> The HQ MEAL team worked with the Gateway team to set up both reports and dashboards within Gateway. “In Gateway, reports pull from all record types and provide access to data in real time.” Reports allow users to use “filters to refine and sort the data.” Reports are displayed in rows and columns. Once reports have been developed, dashboards can be built to “show data from reports in visual components such as charts, table, or gauges. Behind every dashboard is a report” (CRS, 2014a, slide 2).

<sup>30</sup> Gateway was rolled out across all regions, beginning in November 2014, with all regions live on the system by July 2015. This allowed all regions to report on BSDI for the first time within the Gateway system for FY2015.

to Gateway was widely seen as a positive improvement to the BSDI initiative. With these two key shifts, BSDI has become more integrated and visible through the agency.

*Requesting information on services areas for the first time.* As in previous years, beneficiaries were reported by donor source project number and by program area. However, in FY2015 one additional component was added. Projects were also asked to indicate the services areas covered by each project. As previously described, service areas are more detailed categories within a particular broader program area. For example, within the program area health, there are 11 service areas including nutrition, safe motherhood, malaria, and so on. Teams were not asked how many beneficiaries per service, but simply which services they were providing. This step in the BSDI evolution helped to familiarize staff to the concept of the more sub-categorized service areas. This new component continued to be reported on in FY2016. This information provides the agency with the ability to more accurately understand the nuances of which services are being provided by which projects.

*Developing clearer systems for counting capacity strengthening beneficiaries.* The MEAL and PCS teams continued to work together to improve the guidance on reporting beneficiaries who received capacity strengthening services. As mentioned in FY2013 and in FY2014, capacity strengthening beneficiaries could be counted in one of two ways: embedded in one of the nine original program areas as a “capacity strengthening for partners” service area, or within the stand-alone capacity strengthening program area.<sup>31</sup> Because beneficiaries were not being counted at the service-area level, it was nearly impossible to know how many beneficiaries were receiving capacity-strengthening services if they had been reporting the first way—embedded in one of the nine original program areas. To respond to this challenge, in FY2015 the embedded capacity strengthening service areas were removed from each program area in the BSDI Catalogue. Staff were requested to now report all capacity-strengthening beneficiaries

under the stand-alone program area for partner capacity strengthening. This adjustment makes it feasible for the PCS team to know how many partners’ staff/volunteers received some form of capacity strengthening.

*Revising the Catalogue to reflect updated definitions.* The BSDI Catalogue was shared with all technical program area leads at the HQ level, and they were asked to review the services and illustrative definitions for direct and indirect beneficiaries within their technical areas of expertise. This process resulted in several important adjustments in the Catalogue, and also served as an opportunity to engage the technical staff in the BSDI process. No changes were made to the 10 program areas, but several were made to the services areas within each program area. For example, in FY2015 several new services were added to the HIV/AIDS program area relating to orphans and vulnerable children. Furthermore, the BSDI Catalogue was re-packaged in a user-friendly layout and translated into French and Spanish.

## Results of the BSDI Initiative

This section presents a brief summary of the results from 2012 through 2015 BSDI exercises, which were described in detail in the previous Methods section. These results are further elaborated upon in the following discussion section.

### 2012 Results

This rapid data-collection exercise resulted in a total of nearly 29 million direct beneficiaries reported across 66 countries (Report to the Executive Leadership Committee, 2013). The reported data on indirect beneficiaries were found to be flawed. At that time, CRS projects were not in the practice of collecting indirect beneficiary data, and the definitions for indirect beneficiaries by program and service area provided in the Catalogue were not sufficiently clear for project managers to report on them accurately. Based on pre-determined estimated ratios of direct versus

<sup>31</sup> For example, 10 staff within a partner organization were provided training in malaria prevention and treatment. This training was considered a capacity strengthening activity because it strengthened the partner organization’s knowledge of malaria prevention, which would ultimately strengthen their capacity to implement malaria projects. Prior to FY2015 those 10 beneficiaries would have been counted under the health program area. However, in FY2014 it was determined

that this way of reporting presented a challenge to the PCS team because they were unable to determine how many health beneficiaries were actually partner staff receiving capacity strengthening services. In FY2015, it was decided that such beneficiaries would no longer be counted under health. They would now be counted under the program area called capacity strengthening for partners.

indirect beneficiaries by program area, HQ MEAL staff estimated aggregate indirect beneficiaries by region and program area. Although the difference between the two estimates of indirect beneficiaries was small, (49 million reported versus 50 million estimated indirect beneficiaries using pre-determined ratios) the data were deemed not reliable enough to be reported to the Board, nor be included in the CRS annual report for FY2012.

### *2013 Results*

In FY2013, country programs reported a total of 94.4 million beneficiaries (33.0 million direct and 61.2 million indirect) across 77 countries.

As with the FY2012 exercise, the FY2013 data (direct and indirect beneficiaries by donor source project number and program area) were reported in eBudget and carefully reviewed for data quality. When there were questionable data, the HQ-based MEAL team requested an explanation and/or revision from the field. The number of indirect beneficiaries was checked closely against established ratios of direct-to-indirect beneficiaries. Again, where data were questioned, the MEAL staff kept a record of the correspondence, what was questioned, and what the explanations were. There were fewer questions on reported indirect beneficiary data for FY2013 than arose for FY2012 reported indirect beneficiary data, indicating the value of the improved illustrative indirect beneficiary definitions. As for FY2012 data, this record was especially helpful in identifying that the guidance for data reporting was particularly unclear and needed improvement.

It was clear from seeing issues such as rounded numbers (indicating that projects may be reporting targets, not actuals), inflated figures, and unexplainable direct/indirect beneficiary ratios (both indicating particular areas of the Catalogue that needed to be made more clear) where the guidance needed to be strengthened and more support needed to be made available to country programs. However, the overall quality of reported FY2013 data was still far better than the quality of reported FY2012 data.

### *2014 Results*

In FY2014, a total of 85.4 million beneficiaries (22.6 million direct and 62.8 million indirect) were reported using eBudget. A limitation was identified with the way the capacity strengthening beneficiaries were being counted. Because beneficiaries were not being counted at the service-area level, it was not possible to isolate those

capacity strengthening beneficiaries being reported as embedded within the original nine program areas. They were getting lost in the program area counts, and so it was difficult to say how many of the beneficiaries within each program area were specifically receiving capacity strengthening services. This information was important for the PCS Unit, and a solution was implemented in FY2015.

### *2015 Results*

In FY2015, a total of 107.4 million total beneficiaries (42.7 million direct and 64.7 million indirect) were reported into Gateway across 79 countries.

## **Discussion of the Value of the BSDI Initiative and Lessons Learned**

This section provides a discussion of the 2012 through 2015 results presented in the previous section. It focuses on the utility of the results from each year and the lessons learned that were used to inform each following year's reporting exercise. This discussion section goes on to describe future next steps for BSDI as well as a list of cross-cutting lessons learned gleaned from CRS' experience which may be useful to other NGOs pursuing the development of similar systems.

### *Utility of the Results and Lessons Learned in 2012*

The reported data on indirect beneficiaries were found to be flawed and were not used in CRS reporting. But while the FY2012 data were not utilized for reporting, the exercise was considered valuable, as key issues were identified for improvement in FY2013. Getting this pressure from the President forced CRS to jump start BSDI data collection, while at the same time making the agency aware that it would be an ongoing part of the overall end-of-year reporting exercise. The pressure from the top leadership levels of the agency promoted rapid adoption of BSDI reporting. Five cross-cutting lessons learned that were incorporated into the next year's planning cycle were:

- The FY2012 data collection period was rushed, and the field staff did not get adequate advanced notice to produce the data. An annual cycle and timeline needed to be established;

- The field staff needed fuller and clearer guidance materials on how to define and report on direct beneficiaries;
- Only one MEAL staff person was responsible for conducting the exercise, and the level of staffing was not adequate; and
- Definitions and guidance on how to report indirect beneficiaries needed to be refined so that the projects and responses would be able to report their own indirect beneficiaries instead of the HQ MEAL team using ratios to estimate indirect beneficiaries.

### *Utility of the Results and Lessons Learned in 2013*

The FY2013 data were deemed to be reliable enough to report to the Board and to include in the annual report. This was the first time BSDI data were reported at higher agency levels. Based on feedback from the field programs, the BSDI team identified three cross-cutting lessons learned for the next year's planning process:

- The program needed to adopt a data platform that was more dynamic than eBudget for the field programs to use;<sup>32</sup>
- The guidance and Catalogue needed substantial revisions to provide better guidance around capacity strengthening definitions to ease confusion and further clarify indirect beneficiary definitions. In addition, further support and training was needed at the field level.
- The team needed more HQ-based staff. Although the MEAL Regional Technical Advisors were extremely useful for work with countries in their region, helping to ensure data was submitted, they did not provide support in the review and validation process. This activity required unexpected and significant dedicated time of HQ staff members. In retrospect, the review and validation process benefitted from

having a centralized review process at HQ, especially in the early years.

### *Utility of the Data and Lessons Learned in 2014*

Up until FY2014, the BSDI data had been used primarily to report to the executive leadership team and to the Board. In FY2014, other teams within the agency—mostly at the HQ level—began to request BSDI-related data. BSDI was gaining traction, and staff were beginning to recognize the usefulness of the data. In FY2014, the data were not only reported to the Board and executive leadership team and in the annual report, but other groups such as the marketing and communications unit began requesting BSDI data to include in marketing materials, and various program area technical leads began asking for the data. For instance, the health team requested a list of all projects that reported beneficiaries so that they could classify their beneficiaries even further, and the Director of the Health Signature Program Area requested HIV/AIDS beneficiary data by region. A demand for more granular data was emerging—and not just from the executive team, but from the program staff themselves. This was a good indication that BSDI was slowly being adopted and valued within the agency.

### *Utility of the Results and Lessons Learned in 2015*

In FY2015, the accessibility and utilization of the BSDI data expanded, due in large part to the switch to Gateway (Text Box 4). The HQ MEAL team received multiple requests from various countries to provide BSDI data trends since FY2012 for their particular countries so they could use the information for their own performance management and marketing.

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<sup>32</sup> While eBudget served as a quick and easy solution for data entry, it was becoming clear that it was not an ideal system to analyze, visualize, and report BSDI findings. As a financial management tool, it was not a dynamic performance management platform. To analyze data, the MEAL team was required to export all data into Excel spreadsheets for analysis and reporting. With much back-and-forth between country programs, version control issues had to be carefully managed, and there was limited capacity to provide results back to the country programs, aside from sending some high-level,

aggregated reports and charts generated from Excel and then presented in a PowerPoint presentation. Also, very few staff had access to eBudget—generally financial managers in country programs, along with the head of programs or other key leadership staff. MEAL and programmatic staff generally did not have access, and they had to rely on the financial manager to enter their BSDI data and to pull reports as needed. This system also did not allow MEAL regional technical advisors (RTAs) to see which projects had not reported in their regions, so they could not follow up accordingly.

I cannot emphasize enough the beauty and efficiency of the reporting process in this FY[2015] in comparison with previous FYs—this by far the best! In comparison with eBudget, the Gateway gives us all access to data, changes are immediately posted with reports being updated, export in Excel eases up any additional data manipulation and enables customization, which all definitely facilitates higher engagement of everyone in the process and supports better data quality and use (Regional MEAL Technical Advisor, personal communication, December 8, 2016).

Text Box 4. Sample Feedback From MEAL RTAs on the Impact of Gateway on the the BSDI System

There were also numerous examples that BSDI data were being utilized at the regional level.<sup>33</sup> In one case, the Europe, Middle East, and Central Asia region noted that they used the FY2015 data to go a step further and estimate the number of unique beneficiaries in their region—a feature not yet available in BSDI.

Based on feedback from staff at the end of reporting, the team identified four new cross-cutting lessons learned for the next phase:

- Staff turnover affects the quality and punctuality with which BSDI data are submitted. During times of MEAL staff turnover in countries and/or regions, there are often significant delays in BSDI data submission. In countries and/or regions where staff turnover has occurred, the involvement of the HQ MEAL staff is intensified, often working directly with heads of programs directly to finalize BSDI reporting.
- There remains a need to better define how to count beneficiaries of mass communication and publicity campaigns designed to promote community empowerment. For example, if a project broadcasts a radio message aimed to share agricultural best practices and information with local farmers, further guidance needs to be developed on how to best estimate how many farmers received and/or benefited from that radio broadcast.
- The data review and validation process is time consuming and falls on the HQ MEAL staff. It requires an intensive two to three-month period whereby the data are reviewed and many questions for clarification are sent back to the field to ensure quality data are reported. It is the headquarters MEAL team's hope that data quality and timeliness will continue to improve significantly from year to year, easing the validation and review process.

As mentioned before, projects were asked to indicate which services were provided by their projects within Gateway. Many projects did report this information, however, the structure of the data entry for that information included a multiple choice list, and therefore, when it was time to analyze and report, it was very difficult to conduct meaningful analysis on this information due to the way the entry fields were configured. This will be amended in FY2016, along with other small adjustments to the BSDI Gateway interface.

*Next Steps—Beyond 2016*

CRS' current BSDI initiative is highly dynamic and slated for additional refinement over the second half of the current five-year agency strategy period through 2018. There are specific tasks to complete and deliverables to reach to move from collecting and reporting on beneficiary and service delivery data to analysis of these data for improved agency performance; to more fully utilize the analytic power of data derived from the BSDI process. These tasks include:

- Determining a common identifier allowing for identification and tracking of unique beneficiaries so as to prevent double counting;
- Identifying beneficiaries of behavior change mass communication and public awareness campaigns;
- Reporting beneficiaries by service area allowing for more granular determination of programmatic coverage yielding performance measurement, e.g. percent targeted beneficiaries and geographic area actually achieved and
- Integrating analysis of –

<sup>33</sup> For example, the Central African Republic CRS office requested all BSDI data from previous years (2010, 2012-2015), as it was approached by a major funder asking it to share how many beneficiaries had been served since 2009. Because eBudget did not store year-to-year date,

the country program did not have access to historical data. Going forward with Gateway, teams will have easy access to previous years. (Scott, personal communication, February 4, 2016).

- common outcome-level indicators together with beneficiary and service delivery data and
- project-level beneficiary and service delivery data with project-level expenses.

While many of the MEAL practices and project databases are designed to report beneficiary data for this type of detail, as an agency CRS needs to be more consistent in these areas across all projects. Determining the feasibility and timeline for each of these identified tasks will be conducted through a BSDI Assessment before the end of the current agency strategy.

The most important step moving forward is to expand the BSDI data collection process and configure the CRS information management system to report on unique beneficiaries—i.e. the number of individuals who have received at least one different benefit from a project. As the process and ICT systems evolve, the team charged with overseeing the beneficiary and service delivery reporting will need to develop the guidance and training for country program and project staff to develop unique beneficiary identifiers to distinguish multi-service recipients and single-service recipients and enable CRS to identify, distinguish and track those who receive at least one service from a CRS project (unique beneficiaries) and the number of services delivered to multi-service recipients from that same project. In this way the perennial and pervasive challenge of beneficiary double counting will be manageable.

As the BSDI initiative moves toward more fine-tuned data collection methods, CRS projects are being encouraged to develop individual beneficiary databases. In order to leverage the full potential of the BSDI system, CRS projects will need to maintain beneficiary databases that are able to track the services received along with beneficiary characteristics, such as age, gender, and geographic location of individual beneficiaries. While many of the MEAL systems and beneficiary databases within CRS are structured to report on this type of detail, as an agency CRS needs to be more consistent in this area.

During the same time period, the team needs to decide on criteria for counting beneficiaries for CRS' mass communication and public awareness campaigns. This involves working with the appropriate groups within CRS to develop guidance for field staff on how to estimate and report beneficiaries for these types of activities so that the size of the audience actually receiving the message can be reasonably and demonstrably estimated—e.g. for radio announcements, that there is a valid listener estimation calculation that can be applied

to the message delivery; and for community awareness messaging, such as street skits, message boards, radio announcements, that the number of people receiving the message can be estimated and documented.

### *Lessons Learned for Other NGOs*

*Lesson learned #1: Start small before scaling up.* CRS started with a big vision but took a step-by-step approach, starting small and slowly scaling up to allow its staff to realize the value of the new ALM system organically. The BSDI initiative started by collecting data that the field programs were most interested in and ended each year with a short, manageable list of lessons learned for the next phase.

- *Recommendation #1.1: Focus new systems on the data demanded rather than an exhaustive list of all the types of data that programs and headquarters staff might like to collect.*
- *Recommendation #1.2: Conclude each year with a detailed assessment of what did and did not work before setting the priorities for the coming year.*

CRS started with the easiest data to measure—direct beneficiaries, which many projects were already capturing with their project-level beneficiary tracking systems. Over time, it started to develop more fine-tuned measurements of indirect beneficiaries and the beneficiaries of the local partners it supported through its capacity strengthening programs.

- *Recommendation #1.3: Anticipate a progressive scale up in the types of beneficiary categories that can be tracked.*

*Lesson Learned #2: Provide staff with detailed guidance, training, and internet-based tools to help them learn to collect and analyze the requested data.* CRS did not invest heavily in the development of guidance in the local administrative languages until the second and third years of data collection. Concise guidance, instructive webinars, JobAids, and a help desk were critical to its success. CRS tracked each country's progress and kept records of frequently asked questions, helping it to anticipate these questions in the next generation of guidance and training.

- *Recommendation #2.1: Develop clear and concise guidance for data entry and reporting from the start.*

- *Recommendation #2.2: Complement guidance with JobAid functions and help desks.*
- *Recommendation #2.3: Develop a system for tracking common problems so they can be responded to in future guidance and training programs.*

*Lesson Learned #3: Choose data entry and analysis platforms that are easy for local staff to access and use.* Two factors that had the most dramatic impact on local programs' access to and use of the BSDI initiative were the agency-wide conversion to Gateway as the BSDI data platform and the creation of data dashboards as a mechanism for visualizing and sharing data patterns.

- *Recommendation #3.1: Choose data platforms that are easy for field staff to use—ideally ones already in use within the agency.*
- *Recommendation #3.2: Develop data dashboards that help staff to analyze and present their beneficiary data.*

*Lesson Learned #4: Ensure high-level administrative support for beneficiary tracking.* High-level administrative and leadership support gave the CRS MEAL staff the technical assistance and training resources needed to develop the BSDI initiative. This support was maintained by several factors. The first was sustained communication with the administration. The second factor, which contributed to the first, was an experienced MEAL officer with administrative experience who became the liaison officer with the administration and the board. His background in administration helped him better orchestrate and manage expectations for the new system. The same high levels of institutional support gave staff enough time to develop the system properly with input from the field.

- *Recommendation #4.1: Prioritize the cultivation and management of relationships with the agency boards and administrators in order to understand and manage their expectations.*

*Lesson Learned #5: Plan for the amount of labor that will be needed for the development of the system in the early years.* The development of an ALM system is very labor intensive. These costs are easy to underestimate. Since this type of system is usually supported with core funds (i.e. funds not related to a project), it is critical to have strong institutional support for essential staff. The BSDI initiative started with just one staff member in 2012

and scaled up to two. The number of staff (one) was adequate during the first and second year when the program was just getting started, but became less adequate as it expanded in the third and fourth year, so a second staff member was hired. When CRS decided to increase the level of effort of the two staff members tasked with backstopping the BSDI system, the program's utility and impact really took off.

- *Recommendation #5.1: Prepare for an increase of labor demands on staff in the design phase and early years of implementation.*

*Lesson Learned #6: Link beneficiary tracking to other types of routine end-of-year reporting.* Some of CRS' program staff were initially attracted to the idea of having more frequent (e.g. quarterly or bi-annual) updates. They soon realized that even annual reporting requires a great deal of attention to detail and clarification with HQ. One strength of the CRS BSDI initiative was its decision to link beneficiary tracking to the annual financial reports that all projects had to complete. This sent a powerful message to the staff that the system was important and embedded with other required annual reporting requests.

- *Recommendation #6.1: Integrate beneficiary tracking into the routine procedures for annual reporting.*

## Conclusion

CRS began the BSDI development process with four guiding principles:

1. That there be continued agency leadership endorsement for and utilization of BSDI data;
2. That BSDI be developed in small steps, with proper validation before-hand and enough time for each step to be adequately adopted;
3. That BSDI be easy for and useful to field staff who would be gathering and using the data; and
4. That BSDI not require technology or data gathering methods that were unfamiliar to field staff. Specifically, it had to be designed for paper-based data capture.

Together, the steps taken and the subsequent lessons CRS learned along the way in developing and establishing the practice of beneficiary tracking provided a subtle and implicit socialization process that led to acceptance and utilization of BSDI data.

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