

The community scorecard process: methodology, use, successes, challenges and opportunities

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Introduction

This article covers the use and basic functions of the community scorecard process. It draws on lessons from the community-based monitoring project implemented by Plan Malawi, ActionAid and the Council for Non Governmental Organisations of Malawi (CONGOMA). It covers the methodological approach, steps and decision-making levels at which it is used. It also examines the successes and challenges – and how innovation has been used to surmount them.

What are community scorecards?

The community scorecard process is a social accountability mechanism.¹ It is used to exact social accountability from duty bearers vis-à-vis the state of services in various sectors. The process has several steps aimed at giving feedback to service providers based on experiences of service users which later feed into re-planning processes. All steps are led by a civil soci-



Photo: CAVWOC

A cross section of participants in the scorecard process in Chikhwawa district.

ety organisation (CSO) that is independent of government in order to provide independent and objective judgement on the performance of facilities. It is only the institutionalisation stages that are led by service providers in collaboration with service users. The CSO intermediary takes a monitoring role in conjunction with stakeholders, depending on the level

¹ For a definition of social accountability, see the glossary (this issue).

Table 1:		
Stage	What does it consist of?	Outputs
Preparatory groundwork.	Acquiring major national and international service standards and understanding socio-political contexts on the ground e.g. teacher to pupil ratios, maximum number of people who can use a water borehole, nurse to patient ratios etc.	Service standards and benchmarks.
Developing input tracking matrix.	Listing key inputs of the service or project, and the standards for assessors to adhere to e.g. the national pupil to teacher ratio. In the social audit, this will be compared to the reality on the ground (e.g. actual number of pupils being taught by each teacher).	Input tracking matrix.
Developing a facility performance scorecard (facilities may include e.g. schools, rural health centres, water points/boreholes etc.)	Discussing which factors affect delivery of services at a facility. Consolidating scores from various focus group discussions (FGDs) into one community score. For example, service users may score health workers on their adherence to working hours on a score of 1–5. The greater the score, the better. A score of 1 would mean no adherence to daily opening and closing hours. Concrete reasons backing the score are also provided.	Community-generated facility performance scorecard.
Developing a service provider self-evaluation scorecard.	Self-evaluation by service providers on how they think they deliver on services. For example, workers at a health centre may also score themselves on their performance in 'adhering to working hours' giving reasons to back the score they have chosen.	Service provider scorecard.
Interface meeting between service providers and service users.	Plenary to present community and service provider scorecards and agree ways forward.	Joint action plan.
Follow-up and institutionalisation	Interfaces at district and national levels to present results and advocate for changes. The plan of action is the means through which institutionalisation of the process takes place. It is led by either the government workers or community members depending on the nature of activity in the agreed plan.	Plan of action influences change in service provision.

at which implementation is taking place. Table 1 (above) summarises the steps.

The scorecard process, as used in Malawi, is an alternative tool to budget tracking methodologies such as public expenditure tracking studies (PETS).^{2 3}

Budget tracking is not viable if national and local governments lack openness and fail to provide timely information on budget allocations. The alternative is to look at the final service provided at the point of access – hence the scorecard approach.

² Budget tracking usually refers to monitoring expenditure. It can be looked at vertically (i.e. how does money flow through a system from national to district to local level?) or horizontally (how are disbursements made at one point in the system, are they regular and spent as planned?). The focus is on whether the money is spent as detailed in the plan. Budget tracking can also link to an evaluation of the impact of a particular budget. Source: www.right-to-education.org/node/20

³ Public expenditure tracking studies (PETS) can help to identify and address weaknesses in budget execution. They can also indicate where a current policy is not effective, and feed into discussions of how to improve value for money. Source: www.opml.co.uk/issues/budget-execution.

Table 2: A sample scorecard from Takhiwa

No	Indicator	Scores	Comments
1	Fairness in beneficiary selection	3	Not all needy people are selected due to limited number of coupons.
2	Timeliness in beneficiary selection	5	In good time before the rains (September).
3	Transparency in selection of beneficiaries	5	Selection is done by the people themselves at a public meeting called by the village headman together with the extension workers.
4	Access to inputs	3	Fertiliser and seeds come once and in very low quantities. We queue for the whole day and sometimes spend 2 days in the queue. All the people queue in one line regardless of sex, age, strength, physical abilities/disabilities, health etc.
5	Conduct of managing officials	2	They are corrupt – they need extra Mk 200–500. They open very late. They accept fake coupons and prioritise business people. They are stubborn as well.
6	Security of extension workers	3	Others are beaten by those who have not received coupons.
7	Fairness in coupon distribution	5	All registered beneficiaries receive coupons.
8	Follow-up by extension workers	4	He tries hard but his area of responsibility is too large. He has no transport so he must travel long distances on foot.

The action plans developed at a facility or point-of-service are used as a springboard for action to improve services. Some issues can be resolved via local actions manageable at community level such as providing clean toilets at a health centre. Other issues require the attention of local governments or changes in policy and therefore engagement with national stakeholders.

Relevance to rural communities

Rural communities are the least consulted when major resource allocation decisions are taken, including on the national budget. District development plans (DDPs) have a life span of several years. Yet factors that affect rural livelihoods seem to change every year. Over time, plans become less relevant and less aligned with the changing needs and aspirations of people.

Rural communities also have little or no access to radio, television and other means of communication to link up with authorities. In Malawi, this has been further compounded by the failure by government to hold local elections to elect councillors, who are the link between local communities and planners. Their absence deprives communities from a key means of providing constant feedback to planners.

The community scorecard process seems appropriate to these circumstances, since it empowers service users and service providers to start discussing issues affecting the services delivery, working from the bottom to the top through sectoral structures to effect change.

Methods, approaches and innovations

The community scorecard process collects disaggregated data from men, women,



Photo: CAVWOC

Women and girls at an interface meeting in Chikhwawa district.

boys, girls, disadvantaged groups, service providers and any other groups according to the need and function of the services. Involving multiple social groups helps to triangulate information so that data quality is enhanced. This information is collected essentially through focus group discussions. Other methods such as ranking or pair comparisons are used within the FGDs.

The major innovation in Malawi has been the use of radio programmes and DVDs to document issues that arise from the scorecard process and to disseminate actions agreed at interface meetings. This helps to document, enhance and share findings and results, as well as increase the flow of information from service users to planners.

Reflections and lessons learnt

Community scorecards provide an excellent alternative to budget tracking methodologies. For example, PETS lack

the popular appeal of scorecards, especially in areas with low literacy levels. The PETS methodology requires specialised training, thereby reducing critical input from service users with limited education.

Moreover, 'following the money' is not as useful as looking at what the money has actually delivered. This is where the assessment of services at the point of access is arguably a more powerful approach. It involves both the supply and demand sides in analysing and challenging each other on critical issues affecting services. It also analyses the social interactions and physical factors that render the service available or unavailable to users. Picture symbols are used to facilitate recognition by illiterate people, symbolising their emotions and feelings about the service.

Successes and key outcomes

The major success of this initiative is the district administrators' acceptance that the

Photo: CAVWOC



A scene at an interface meeting in Chikhwawa.

process is a useful tool in planning. They recognise that it provides evidence on how services are delivered as well as giving a chance for planners and service providers to improve the relevance of life-changing interventions in rural communities.

More specific successes are:

- Stopping child labour practices rampant in some schools. These were raised in children's focus groups and raised at the plenary feedback. Local decisions at interface meetings abolished such practices and committed specific actors to monitoring the abolition.
- A combination of scorecard reports and a participatory expenditure tracking study (PETS) looking at salary administration in primary schools. These have helped provide evidence and contributed to the eventual change in payment of salaries to teachers. The scorecards project is the only platform that produced a report from a systematic study on inefficiencies associated with the existence of two teachers' salaries delivery systems and their effects on rural teaching services.
- Improved access of youths under the age of 17 to farm inputs under the farm input subsidy programme (FISP). Youth experienced problems registering and accessing inputs due to the requirement of voter cards as identification.
- Improved access to FISP inputs at markets where community-based monitoring activities took place. At these markets, congestion and scrambling for inputs has decreased, mainly due to increased collaboration between chiefs and their subjects – especially in organising procedures for access and beneficiary identification.
- Following the creation of market point vigilant committees, there has been a decrease in the use of fake coupons to access inputs. Also, no incidents of illicit sales were reported in mobilised areas.
- Daily newspapers and key radio stations have increased their reporting on issues raised by the project.



Photo: CAVWOC

Women fill in their scorecards during an assessment of education services.

- Information provided by the scorecard process has also been used to allocate health and educational resources, mainly in the allocation of staff in Mulanje and Karonga Districts. In fact, Mulanje deployed medical assistants to all health facilities following project advocacy activities.

All of the above were implemented during the follow-up and institutionalisation stage of the scorecard process. They are a testimony to the relevance of the community scorecard process to development and planning in Malawi.

Limitations of the process

The major limitation has been not a flaw of the methodology or process. There is a lack of formal and legitimised linkages between rural communities and the district assemblies due to the current lack of local councillors. This has greatly reduced the scope for systematic institutionalisation and follow-up in

mainstream governance structures. To get around this, we have been working with local leaders and members of parliament as representatives of rural communities. They form part of the district executive committee, a body created to make decisions while councillors are not yet elected.

Other key limitations are:

- Uptake of action plans at both local and district levels is slow. Actors at both levels expect the project to provide additional funding to prop up the implementation of action plans.

- Initial assessments are met with resistance and scepticism by district administrators. They often see the tool as confrontational rather than an opportunity to get direct and constructive feedback from service users.

- The assessments raise high expectations which are sometimes difficult to manage by both CSOs facilitating the process and the district assemblies.

Photo: CSCD



Men discuss their appreciation of education services in Kasungu.



Photo: Plan Malawi

A facilitator leads a women's focus group discussion to assess agriculture services in Chikhwawa.

- The process relies heavily on the media for advocacy and follow-up on issues.

Points for future improvement

In future, all community scorecard assessments will be systematically backed up by audiovisual resources, either radio programmes (live or recorded) or DVDs. These will capture key feedback across genders, ages and classes. Live radio broadcasts of interface meetings at community level will also be trialled in 2011. Planners and policy makers respond well to media which include the voices of service users. It reduces resistance and enhances action.

Involving the media at all levels of the assessments is also key – and ensuring that the media convey the process and its outputs accurately and constructively. Since the process starts at the local level, using the media only at district and national levels is insufficient and inaccurate. Media involvement is coordinated by the NGO that facilitates the scorecard process. However, the media have freedom to write about whatever they feel is newsworthy. If the NGO facilitating the scorecard process identifies big gaps in the media's reporting of activities, they provide media outlets with supplementary documentaries to ensure better media coverage.

Likewise, it is important to use several approaches to disseminate key messages

and action points to planners and policy makers. Radio and films can reach the eyes and ears of key stakeholders involved in service provision. This is the only practical way of reaching more people, since interface meetings only accommodate limited numbers.

Conclusions

While the community scorecard process is not a solution to all problems in rural development, it does offer access to a wealth of community knowledge and information important in service planning. The process allows different social groups to be aware of each others' problems regarding access and enjoyment of government services. Both the outputs and the process itself are ideal for evidence-based advocacy.

The process fosters unity and collective action within communities for engaging with service providers. One of its more unusual features, in terms of other community development approaches and also in terms of other contemporary social accountability approaches, is that it also fosters collective action **between** communities and service providers. What needs to be done to improve services? Who needs to take on which roles to do this? It is at these interfaces that accountable relationships need to be constructed, institutionalised and sustained.

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