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CASE STUDY

EQUITYTOOL wealth assessment: finding a practical solution for ensuring services reach those with the greatest need

Sightsavers researchers compare EquityTool with other asset-based wealth assessment tools to identify a practical solution for field-based vision care project targeting



BACKGROUND

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world, with more than 50% of the population living below the national poverty line, and 25% living in extreme poverty. As a result, many Malawians face challenges in accessing health care—access that is even more difficult for poor people to achieve when they experience other disadvantages, such as gender inequalities or disability, in addition to poverty.¹

Sightsavers served Malawians in need of vision care through [Coordinated Approach To Community Health](#) (CATCH), an integrated eye health program funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID),² to increase the coverage of eye health services in trachoma-endemic areas of Eastern and Southern Africa. CATCH intended to reduce health disparities by reaching those with the greatest need, including people in remote and rural locations, those living with disabilities, and those with low incomes compared to others in their communities and to the national poverty line.

CHALLENGE: ENSURING THAT SERVICES REACH TARGET RECIPIENT GROUPS

Was CATCH succeeding in reaching the right people with interventions? To answer this, the program needed to understand the sociodemographic and socioeconomic profiles of CATCH participants. Even in the most remote areas, it is possible that health programs reach only individuals who are comparatively advantaged and fail to meet the needs of the most underserved community members.

Unfortunately, it can be time consuming and expensive to collect community and household wealth information, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where in-kind payments make up a significant proportion of income, and income often fluctuates according to seasonality and migration. This discourages regular collection of information that should be available to inform planning and ongoing program implementation. Sightsavers needed to identify a practical, easy-to-use reliable tool that allowed program staff to regularly assess relative wealth in program participants.

Between April and September 2017, Sightsavers implemented a descriptive cross-sectional survey to test multiple wealth assessment tools in Kasungu district, Central Malawi. As well as assessing the disability status of individuals, the relative and absolute wealth of CATCH camp participants was measured. The study involved collecting and analyzing data from patients at monthly CATCH eye camps to assess equity of access to the camps' eye care services, and to answer the question: Is CATCH reaching the poorest, people with disabilities, and women?

Sightsavers researchers defined three objectives:

- Validate self-reported household characteristics;
- Compare CATCH beneficiaries' socioeconomic status with the rest of the district population;
- Determine how reliable and effective the EquityTool and Simple Poverty Scorecard are for collecting routine data on economic status of program beneficiaries.

The study was undertaken with a goal of identifying data that could help guide the program's community mobilization and awareness raising campaigns, ultimately, ensuring that the program reached those in greatest need and left no one in the community behind.

SOLUTION: IDENTIFYING A PRACTICAL, RELIABLE WEALTH ASSESSMENT TOOL

The EquityTool is a simple and easy-to-use tool that allows users to measure relative wealth by comparing the wealth of respondents to the national or urban-only population of the country. It provides a short set of questions that can be incorporated into any survey platform and is free to use. The short set of questions facilitates easy, quick, and inexpensive data collection and analysis of wealth distribution. This allows for fast and accurate comparisons across programs and populations into five wealth quintiles (quintile 1 is the poorest, quintile 5 the wealthiest). EquityTool data lets users make near real-time adjustments in program delivery that increase organizational effectiveness and strengthen program outcomes.

The short EquityTool survey, which can be completed in a few minutes, measures household wealth based on country-specific questions that can be adjusted to the context. It is available for over 65 countries and survey questions are pre-translated into local languages. Each country-specific EquityTool questionnaire identifies what percentage of respondents are in each national or urban wealth quintile, and supplies the appropriate statistical code and assessment instructions for analysis. Compatible with any data collection platform – even paper-based systems – the EquityTool requires only six to 18 questions from the DHS Wealth Index for a respondent's country, reducing the number of variables needed for accurate wealth assessment.

The Sightsavers researchers tested the EquityTool, as well as a second asset-based tool, the Simple Poverty Scorecard (SPS), as potential solutions for ongoing, practical wealth assessment. (The project also employed the Washington Group Short Set of Questions on Disability, though this will not be explored in the current case study.) CATCH participant responses were collected at CATCH camp locations, then follow-up household visits were conducted to check the validity of self-reported household characteristics.

¹ <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2017/07/05/Malawi-Economic-Development-Documents-45037>

² It is now Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

RESULTS: WEALTH CAN BE ASSESSED THROUGH SIMPLE TOOLS WITH LITTLE IMPACT IN TIME, EXPENSE, OR INCONVENIENCE TO RESPONDENTS

Sightsavers determined that using both the EquityTool and the SPS produced complementary results, with the SPS showing how poor respondents are in absolute terms, and the EquityTool assessing respondents' wealth in comparison with the national or the urban population. They also noted that comparing CATCH camp respondents with the population of Kasungu rather than the national population produced more relevant results.

After analyzing the responses of more than 1,358 respondents, researchers determined that while CATCH outreach camps in Kasungu district were reaching the poorest members of the population: 9% of participants belonged to the quintile 1, while in the general population in Kasungu only 4% were in quintile 1. However, the majority of participants were in the two wealthiest quintiles (many of whom were still below the national poverty line), and only a quarter of participants inhabited quintiles 1 and 2. Study findings also showed that, despite women having more risks for eye conditions, more men than women were reached through the program.

Additionally, home visits to randomly selected respondents demonstrated that self-reported household characteristics are a reliable means of measuring the asset-based wealth of respondents, and can be collected in clinical settings, reducing the additional work and cost of relying on direct observations of assets. This is a valuable finding, as household surveys may be disruptive or impractical for facility-based projects.

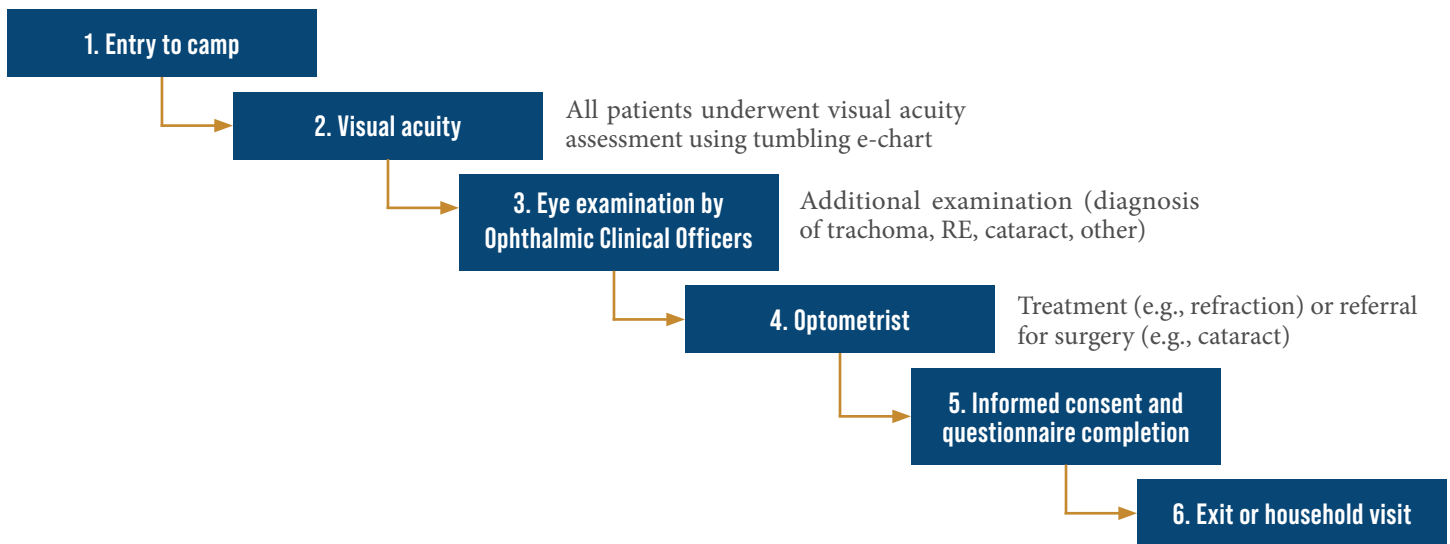
“It’s always a matter of allocating resources,” says Sightsavers Research Associate, Guillaume Trotignon. “We don’t always have time and money to conduct household surveys to collect this information. Collecting data at a health facility level is easier and more efficient.”

Overall, the Sightsavers researchers concluded that existing tools can be reliably used, and combined, if based on recent population data, to assess equity of access to health services for vulnerable groups of the population.³

In addition to clarifying the distribution of CATCH participants across wealth quintiles, the study provided insights into the relationships between wealth and other conditions related to inequality, including sex, age, marital status, education, occupation, and disability. For example, respondents in the wealthiest quintile were 46% less likely to report living with a disability. Interestingly, disability status did not seem to be correlated to being above or below the poverty line. Women in the study who were widowed, divorced, living with a disability, and/or older than 50 years of age, were less likely to be in the wealthiest quintile. Those respondents with higher levels of education, or working in skilled labor, on the other hand, were more likely to be in the wealthiest quintile.

One of the most valuable findings of this study was that it is feasible and practical to use both wealth measurement tools and disability questions for routine data collection in eye care camps. Data collection for this study did not create a significant burden on outreach activities. The study involved a human resource cost of five data collectors working 24 days, but this was integrated in ongoing program activities, meaning that these costs would ordinarily be covered by program delivery costs. The study also found that data collectors’ work did not disrupt the program’s normal work, and program staff confirmed that surveying study participants had minimal effect on their usual camp routine. Researchers identified the period after the initial screening as the optimal point for data collection to limit any inconvenience to patients.

FIGURE 1. FLOW DIAGRAM OF OUTREACH CAMP PROCESS



³ <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0268116#pone.0268116.ref009>

Because this study occurred in 2017, the research team found themselves in an unusual situation. The EquityTool is a research-based sample of questions benchmarked to the country DHS Wealth Index. For Malawi, the DHS was conducted in 2010 with the EquityTool released in 2015, and the latest DHS was completed in 2015/16 with the EquityTool updated in late 2017. This meant that at the time Sightsavers was collecting their data, the EquityTool had not yet been updated with the 2015/16 DHS. Initially, the team's results indicated that the respondents were wealthier than the researchers had expected. After considering options and consulting with Metrics for Management, the researchers determined that this was the result of socioeconomic changes in Malawi between the two DHS.

“For example,” offers Guillaume, “mobile phones, 10 years ago, in some regions, were relatively rare; but now they’re so common that this question probably has a low impact on your quintile.” To address this, the team compared their results from the 2015 EquityTool with the 2017 EquityTool and applied a t-test to determine statistical significance of the new results. Because EquityTool questions are a subset of the country's DHS questions, direct comparison is simple and fast.

NEXT STEPS

This study confirmed for Sightsavers that it is possible to assess the wealth of their program participants in an accessible, inexpensive, and reliable way, that lends itself to routine wealth measurement. By generating valuable evidence on the associations between disability, wealth and other sociodemographic factors, this study provides valuable evidence for health interventions in low- and middle-income countries.

As a result of their experience with the EquityTool in the CATCH project, Sightsavers has expanded their use of real-time wealth assessment across other projects and will continue to look for opportunities to use the tool to assess relative wealth.

For more information on how Sightsavers used the EquityTool to help identify those most in need, [read the full article here](#).

M4M can help you use the EquityTool in your project. For more information contact communications@m4mgmt.org.

Lessons Learned

- Self-reported EquityTool responses are reliable means of measuring wealth.
- The EquityTool, used in combination with other tools, can power a broad range of findings about the respondent population.
- Be aware of the DHS survey year to which your version of EquityTool is benchmarked, and if a new DHS has recently been released, determine if you need to compare EquityTool results to the new information.
- When a more localized analysis (for example, in extremely remote areas, or when working with semi-nomadic populations) is needed it is important to use regional and district level subsets of national survey data as benchmarks for comparison.
- Future programs should continue collecting disaggregated data to measure equity of service delivery, ensuring that no one is left behind.



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