

Title

EXAMINING THE RELEVANCE OF BASELINE SURVEYS IN THE SUCCESSFUL IDENTIFICATION OF NGO PROJECTS IN BALAKA DISTRICT, MALAWI

Author

THOKOZANI CHALIRA

Co-Author

MR. JUSTIN MAKAMO



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ABSTRACT

Baseline surveys are widely acknowledged as essential instruments for evidence-based planning, implementation, and evaluation of development interventions. Despite their recognized importance, the extent to which baseline surveys practically contribute to effective project identification among non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in low-resource contexts remains inadequately explored. This study examined the relevance of baseline surveys in the successful identification of development projects among NGOs operating in Balaka District, Malawi, with specific focus on Prison Fellowship Malawi and Tigawane Children's Organization.

A qualitative descriptive case study design was employed. Data were collected from 25 purposively selected participants through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings indicate that baseline surveys play a significant role in validating community needs, guiding prioritization of interventions, and informing project identification. However, discrepancies emerged between NGO staff perceptions of data quality and beneficiaries' experiences of project relevance, suggesting weaknesses in targeting accuracy. Key challenges identified included limited financial resources, inadequate technical capacity, and cultural and language barriers.

The study concludes that while baseline surveys are indispensable for effective project identification, their potential impact is often constrained by operational and contextual limitations. The study recommends strengthening monitoring and evaluation capacity, adopting digital data collection tools, and enhancing community participation to improve the effectiveness of baseline surveys in NGO programming.

Keywords: Baseline survey; project identification; NGOs; monitoring and evaluation; Malawi; community development; beneficiary targeting.

INTRODUCTION

Baseline surveys constitute a fundamental component of evidence-based development programming by providing systematic data on pre-intervention conditions that inform project design, implementation, and evaluation (UNDP, 2019; World Bank, 2020). When effectively conducted, baseline surveys enable development practitioners to align interventions with actual community needs, establish benchmarks for performance measurement, and enhance accountability to donors and beneficiaries.

Globally, development agencies rely on baseline assessments to reduce inefficiencies and improve project relevance across sectors such as education, health, and child protection (OECD, 2020). In sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty, vulnerability, and gaps in service delivery remain widespread,

baseline surveys are particularly critical for ensuring that limited resources are allocated effectively (African Development Bank [AfDB], 2018). Despite their recognized importance, many NGOs continue to operate with weak or poorly integrated baseline data, thereby compromising project relevance and sustainability (Plan International, 2019).

In Malawi, NGOs play a pivotal role in complementing government efforts in social welfare, rehabilitation, and community development. However, challenges such as limited funding, inadequate technical expertise, and contextual constraints often undermine the effective use of baseline data (NSO, 2021). In Balaka District, NGOs such as Prison Fellowship Malawi and Tigawane Children's Organization have implemented numerous interventions targeting rehabilitation, child protection, and social support. Nevertheless, the extent to which baseline surveys inform the identification of these projects remains insufficiently documented. This study therefore examined the relevance of baseline surveys in the successful identification of NGO projects in Balaka District, Malawi.

background of the study

Baseline surveys serve as foundational tools in evidence-based development programming by capturing data on pre-intervention conditions, including community needs, service gaps, vulnerability patterns, and local priorities. This information enables NGOs to design

projects grounded in empirical realities rather than assumptions (UNDP, 2019; World Bank, 2020). Globally, baseline assessments are used to enhance project relevance, minimize inefficiencies, and optimize resource allocation across key development sectors such as education, health, and child protection (OECD, 2020; European Commission, 2018).

In sub-Saharan Africa, where persistent poverty and resource constraints continue to challenge development efforts, baseline surveys are particularly critical for effective targeting and prioritization (AfDB, 2018). Projects informed by robust baseline data have been shown to demonstrate higher relevance, greater stakeholder satisfaction, and improved sustainability (Mugo & Wambua, 2019; World Vision, 2021). However, many NGOs in low-resource settings operate with limited, weak, or poorly integrated baseline data, which undermines project design, beneficiary targeting, and overall impact (Plan International, 2019).

Malawi exemplifies these challenges, as NGOs work alongside government institutions to deliver social welfare, rehabilitation, child protection, and community development services amid constraints such as funding shortages, technical capacity gaps, and contextual barriers (NSO, 2021). In districts such as Balaka, organizations including Prison Fellowship Malawi and Tigawane Children's Organization implement targeted interventions, yet the practical

influence of baseline surveys on project identification remains underexplored within the local context.

problem statement

Baseline surveys are widely regarded as essential tools for evidence-based project identification in non-governmental organizations. They are designed to generate accurate and reliable data on community needs, vulnerabilities, and priorities, thereby informing project design, beneficiary targeting, and resource allocation (World Bank, 2020). In Malawi, particularly in Balaka District, NGOs such as Andiamo Development Organization, Tigawane Children's Organization, and Prison Fellowship Malawi routinely conduct baseline surveys as part of project planning and donor compliance requirements.

Despite this widespread practice, concerns persist regarding the extent to which baseline survey findings meaningfully influence project identification and decision-making processes. In practice, some projects continue to be shaped by predetermined organizational priorities, donor interests, or assumptions about community needs rather than empirical baseline evidence (Mkandawire, 2018; Bamberger et al., 2012). This raises questions about the relevance, accuracy, and utilization of baseline data in shaping context-specific interventions.

Furthermore, challenges such as limited technical capacity, time constraints

during proposal development, financial limitations, inadequate stakeholder participation, and cultural and language barriers often compromise both the quality of baseline surveys and their integration into project identification processes (Asiedu & Osei, 2020; Phiri & Chinsinga, 2020; Chirwa & Dorward, 2013). As a result, projects risk poor beneficiary targeting, misalignment with local needs, and reduced sustainability. While existing studies have examined baseline surveys within broader monitoring and evaluation frameworks, there remains limited empirical research focusing specifically on their role in project identification at the district level in Malawi, particularly among grassroots NGOs operating in resource-constrained settings such as Balaka District.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

main objective

To examine the relevance of baseline surveys in successful project identification among NGOs operating in Balaka District, with specific reference to Andiamo Development Organisation and Tigawane Children's Centre.

specific objectives

To assess the extent to which baseline survey findings influence project identification decisions among NGOs operating in Balaka District.
To evaluate the accuracy and reliability of baseline survey data in beneficiary selection and programme targeting.
To identify challenges faced by NGOs in

conducting and utilising baseline surveys during project identification. To examine the level of stakeholder and community participation in baseline survey processes. To propose strategies for improving the use of baseline surveys in NGO project identification and planning.

research questions

To what extent do baseline survey findings influence project identification decisions among NGOs operating in Balaka District?

How accurate and reliable are baseline survey data in guiding beneficiary selection and programme targeting?

What challenges do NGOs face in conducting and utilising baseline surveys for project identification?

How are community members and stakeholders involved in baseline survey processes?

What strategies can enhance the effective use of baseline surveys in NGO project identification?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Baseline surveys serve as foundational instruments in development projects by establishing pre-intervention conditions that enable measurement of change and impact. They involve systematic data collection on socio-economic indicators, population characteristics, and community needs to guide planning and evaluation (Bamberger et al., 2012; Kusek & Rist, 2004). In resource-constrained environments, baseline data are particularly important for

reconstructing initial conditions when comprehensive surveys are difficult to implement, thereby ensuring realistic assessment of project outcomes (Bamberger et al., 2012).

Project identification and planning represent the early stages of the project cycle in NGO programming. Project identification involves recognizing community needs, defining development problems, and selecting appropriate interventions based on priorities and available resources (Chinyama, 2016). Baseline survey findings facilitate this process by translating assessed needs into objectives, activities, and budgets, ensuring evidence-informed planning (Kusek & Rist, 2004).

NGOs in Malawi operate as independent non-profit entities delivering development and humanitarian services within complex donor and governance environments (Phiri & Chinsinga, 2020; Mkandawire, 2018). Studies on monitoring and evaluation practices among Malawian NGOs reveal variations in implementation, with strong emphasis on accountability but persistent constraints related to capacity and donor influence (Mkandawire, 2018).

Beneficiary targeting relies on criteria-based selection processes informed by baseline data to ensure equitable and effective resource allocation (Chinyama, 2016; Kusek & Rist, 2004). Community participation enhances relevance and ownership by involving local populations in needs assessment and decision-making processes, though participation

levels often vary due to power dynamics and donor priorities (Phiri & Chinsinga, 2020).

Data quality is central to evaluation effectiveness. Data accuracy reflects how well collected information represents actual conditions, while reliability concerns consistency across repeated applications (Rossi et al., 2019; Bamberger et al., 2012). Threats to data quality include methodological weaknesses, limited resources, and contextual constraints, underscoring the need for rigorous baseline design and implementation.

definition of terms

Baseline Survey: The systematic collection of data at the initial stage of a project to establish pre-intervention socio-economic conditions, needs, and characteristics of a target population (Bamberger et al., 2012; Kusek & Rist, 2004).

Project Identification: The process of recognizing, defining, and selecting development problems and potential interventions based on assessed community needs and available resources (Chinyama, 2016).

Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO): A non-profit organization operating independently of government to provide development, humanitarian, or social services (Phiri & Chinsinga, 2020).

Beneficiary Targeting: The process of selecting eligible individuals or groups

for project interventions based on defined criteria and baseline data.

Community Participation: The involvement of community members in project-related processes, including needs assessment, baseline surveys, decision-making, and implementation.

Data Accuracy: The extent to which baseline survey data accurately reflect real conditions and needs.

Data Reliability: The consistency and dependability of baseline data when collected under similar conditions.

Project Planning: The process of translating identified needs into structured project objectives, activities, timelines, and budgets.

Stakeholders: Individuals or institutions with an interest or role in a project, including communities, NGO staff, donors, and government officials.

empirical review

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate the importance of baseline surveys in supporting evidence-based project identification and planning among NGOs. Kusek and Rist (2004) established that baseline data are essential for defining indicators, setting realistic targets, and ensuring accountability. Rossi et al. (2019) similarly found that accurate baseline data improve beneficiary targeting and resource allocation, enhancing project relevance.

However, evidence also reveals persistent gaps between baseline data collection and utilisation. Bamberger et al. (2012) observed that baseline surveys are often conducted primarily to satisfy donor requirements rather than to guide decision-making. In Malawi, Chirwa and Dorward (2013) found that baseline findings were frequently underutilized during project identification, particularly under tight donor timelines. Mkandawire (2018) similarly reported limited integration of baseline findings into project design among Malawian NGOs.

theoretical framework

This study was guided by the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). LFA emphasizes the systematic use of baseline data to define objectives, indicators, and assumptions, ensuring logical and results-oriented project design (Örtengren, 2004). PRA emphasizes community participation in identifying and analysing development needs, thereby enhancing the relevance and quality of baseline data (Chambers, 1994).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive case study design was employed. Purposive sampling was used to select 25 participants with direct experience in baseline surveys and project implementation, including NGO managers, field officers, M&E personnel, and beneficiaries (Yin, 2018; Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data following transcription, coding, and theme development. Ethical approval was obtained from DMI-St. John the Baptist University, and informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The findings indicate that baseline surveys contribute to project identification by identifying priority needs, guiding beneficiary targeting, and informing project objectives. However, baseline findings were not always fully integrated into decision-making processes, with some surveys conducted primarily for donor compliance. Data quality and utilisation were constrained by limited capacity, financial resources, and time pressures. Community participation was largely limited to data provision rather than meaningful involvement in analysis and decision-making.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that baseline surveys are indispensable for successful project identification among NGOs operating in Balaka District. They provide critical evidence for understanding community needs, prioritizing interventions, and enhancing project relevance. However, their effectiveness is constrained by financial limitations, capacity gaps, logistical challenges,

donor-driven timelines, and limited community participation.

The study recommends strengthening NGO capacity in monitoring and evaluation, promoting participatory approaches, adopting digital data collection tools, and integrating baseline surveys into routine project cycles. Future research should explore cost-effective strategies for improving baseline survey utilisation across NGOs in Malawi and similar low-resource contexts.

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