Network Strengthening Program
Case Study Report

Authors
A stride Gilles and Meghan Guida

www.LMGforHealth.org
About the LMG Project

Funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Leadership, Management, and Governance (LMG) Project (2011–2017) is collaborating with health leaders, managers, and policymakers at all levels to show that investments in leadership, management, and governance lead to stronger health systems and improved health. The LMG Project embraces the principles of country ownership, gender equity, and evidence-driven approaches. Emphasis is also placed on good governance in the health sector—the ultimate commitment to improving service delivery and fostering sustainability through accountability, engagement, transparency, and stewardship. Led by Management Sciences for Health (MSH), the LMG consortium includes Amref Health Africa, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health (JHSPH), Medic Mobile, and Yale University Global Health Leadership Institute (GHLI).

Funding was provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under Cooperative Agreement AID-OAA-A-11-00015. The contents are the responsibility of the Leadership, Management, and Governance Project and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.
# Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms ............................................................................................................. 4

1. Background .................................................................................................................................................. 5

2. Purpose ...................................................................................................................................................... 6

3. Objective .................................................................................................................................................... 7

4. Evaluation Questions ................................................................................................................................... 7

5. Methodology .............................................................................................................................................. 8
   Data Collection ........................................................................................................................................... 8
   Data Analysis ............................................................................................................................................ 8
   Limitations ................................................................................................................................................ 9

6. Results and Findings ................................................................................................................................. 9
   The Network Strengthening Program ....................................................................................................... 9
      Designing, planning, and implementing the workshops and sessions .................................................... 9
      Selecting participants to attend the workshops ..................................................................................... 10
      Ensuring participants’ contributions during and in between the workshops ...................................... 10
   MANASO .................................................................................................................................................. 11
      Sustaining the network financially ........................................................................................................ 11
      Reinvigorating the network’s members ................................................................................................. 13
      Governing the network ......................................................................................................................... 14
      Communicating with internal and external stakeholders ................................................................... 15

7. Conclusions and Recommendations ..................................................................................................... 17
   The Network Strengthening Program ....................................................................................................... 17
   MANASO .................................................................................................................................................. 18
      Member support and engagement .......................................................................................................... 18
      Network processes, systems, and collaboration .................................................................................... 18
      Network communications .................................................................................................................... 19

Annex 1. Interview Protocol – Lines of Inquiry ......................................................................................... 20

Annex 2. List of Key Informants and FGD Participants ........................................................................... 23
List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIDS</td>
<td>Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBO</td>
<td>Community-Based Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSO</td>
<td>Civil Society Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGD</td>
<td>Focus Group Discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV</td>
<td>Human Immunodeficiency Virus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LMG</td>
<td>Leadership, Management, and Governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MANASO</td>
<td>Malawi Network of AIDS Service Organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MANET+</td>
<td>Malawi Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOH</td>
<td>Ministry of Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSH</td>
<td>Management Sciences for Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAC</td>
<td>National AIDS Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSP</td>
<td>Network Strengthening Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SADC</td>
<td>Southern African Development Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>US Agency for International Development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Background

Africa has experienced a dramatic proliferation of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) during the past three decades. Because such organizations are often very small, many like-minded NGOs form collaborative networks to amplify their ability to advocate to local governments and donors, and ultimately achieve their goals. Some networks are formed independently, and others are established at the recommendation of and with funding from donors like the Global Fund, USAID, and the World Bank.

It has generally been expected that networks not only provide economies of scale to their member NGOs, but also act as platforms for sharing best practices, policy changes, and other relevant information. Funders have also expected that the networks they support will, in time, become self-sustaining.

To-date, most networks in Africa have operated using the same management approach as the NGOs that make up their membership, with both unrestricted and restricted (project-specific) funding provided by donors. Yet, as member organizations, networks are distinct from NGOs and must be run differently.

The USAID-funded Leadership, Management, and Governance Project (LMG) developed the Network Strengthening Program (NSP) to build the leading, managing, and governing skills of voluntary network managers and leaders, including board members, secretariat leaders, and network managers. The program is designed to be a comprehensive, network-wide approach that participants can use to strengthen the diverse management aspects of their networks.

The objective of the NSP is to improve the effectiveness of networks so they are better able to meet the needs of their members and can enhance long-term sustainability. To achieve this objective, the content of the program focuses on five success factors that were identified through a literature review and a series of interviews with network stakeholders:

1. Membership and benefits
2. Distributed leadership
3. Network governance
4. Financial systems and sustainability
5. Communications for resource mobilization

The components of the program include pre-launch preparation, two technical capacity building workshops, and a final results-sharing and presentation workshop for stakeholders and the broader membership of the network. The pre-launch or preliminary phase, conducted prior to the first workshop, includes preparation and review of foundational network documents. The workshop contents and focus areas are determined based on the priorities of the participating network. These priorities are defined using findings from the document review, a member self-assessment survey, and a mapping exercise to highlight the position of the network within its broader context and identify what stakeholders influence the outcomes as well as the resolution of the network’s challenges. The NSP is highly participatory, based on adult learning theory, and relates directly to the needs and desires of network management. It is designed for 15 - 20 participants, including board members, senior secretariat staff, and highly-engaged members such as committee heads. The whole process is designed
to take six months, but this timing can be adapted to meet the needs of the network.

The first workshop consists of four modules:

- Module #1: Net-Mapping
- Module #2: Membership and Benefits
- Module #3: Distributed Leadership
- Module #4: Governance

The second workshop consists of two modules:

- Module #5: Financial Management and Sustainability
- Module #6: Communications for Resource Mobilization

The program is designed to allow network managers to develop both short-term plans to address specific topics (implemented while they are going through the NSP) and a long-term plan (a Network Strengthening Plan) that frames how they will strengthen their own networks in the 12 months following the program. The Network Strengthening Plan includes priority actions in key focus areas.

Results are demonstrated by the network’s performance during the course of the program in completing their short-term plans and achieving results, and over the following year by taking steps toward achieving their longer-term network strengthening objectives.

The NSP was pilot-tested with two networks in Malawi, one composed of people living with HIV, MANET+, and the other of HIV and AIDS service providers, MANASO. The pilot testing took place over a period of nine months, from September of 2015 to May 2016, and revisions were subsequently made to the curriculum based on lessons learned and experiences facilitating the material.

2. Purpose

Of the two pilot tests, the second was approved after the first had launched. Monitoring and evaluation of the two networks occurred at different intervals and using different approaches. In addition, the curriculum underwent significant revisions between the two pilots, with the second using the final pre-publication version. This case study focuses only on the second pilot, which was undertaken with participants from MANASO, a Malawian network of health service delivery organizations focused primarily on HIV and AIDS at the community level. This pilot took place between October 2015 and May 2016. Based on the work done in the preliminary phase, the NSP with MANASO was adapted to accommodate its large membership size, the different health service delivery focuses of their members, and the geographical dispersion of the network. MANASO requested that the NSP emphasize membership and benefits. The MANASO executive director’s thoughtfulness in participant selection was critical in fostering high engagement among workshop participants.

In order to assess the extent to which MANASO more effectively met its members’ needs following the NSP, the LMG Project developed a pre- and post-program member self-assessment consisting of 33 close-ended questions that asked members to share their perspectives about the network’s operations across the five challenge areas of the NSP. Because of the sheer size of MANASO’s membership (925) and members’ limited internet connectivity, the baseline survey was administered in three ways: online, in-person, and by phone. By the end of December 2015, nearly 300 surveys had been completed, and
preliminary findings were shared with the network at the subsequent workshop in February.

No post-program assessment was conducted because it was determined that doing so would not likely produce useful information. A number of factors led to this conclusion. First, since MANASO was included as a second NSP pilot network at a later stage than the first, the series of NSP workshops was conducted on a compressed schedule (seven months instead of the nine months with MANET+). Second, changes in MANASO’s focus areas following the initial assessment resulted in a change in the network’s desired results midway through the program and a late start on their action plans. Moreover, due to the lack of Internet connectivity among its members, MANASO did not have the opportunity to adequately disseminate the change in its focus and priorities to its members in an expedient manner. Ultimately, it was unlikely that MANASO’s revised desired outcomes would be achieved and disseminated to members by the end of the NSP to any significant degree, and thus would not be reflected in a post-program assessment. As such, the LMG Project decided that a case study would be more valuable for the purpose of developing a greater understanding of the NSP’s effects on MANASO membership.

3. Objective

This case study was designed as a qualitative assessment of the NSP, as implemented with MANASO. The evaluation questions and case study plan outlined below were developed with information synthesized from a targeted literature review, a review of MANASO’s core documents, and the pre-NSP self-assessment survey conducted with a sample of MANASO’s members. This case study serves to evaluate the extent to which the NSP supported MANASO in working more effectively within its operating environment.

4. Evaluation Questions

In order to best capture the link between program implementation and program effects to-date, the case study examined one overarching evaluation question: How did the Network Strengthening Program contribute to MANASO’s ability to adapt its program management to the context of its operating environment?

The evaluation also explored two intermediate outcomes, which MANASO established during the second NSP workshop (Workshop II) and aimed to achieve by May 2016:

1. Expand the number of members paying fees from 50 to 200, primarily by increasing member engagement through the development and dissemination of a member agreement, as well as communications explaining the network’s current financial situation and stressing the intangible benefits of MANASO membership.
2. Develop a roadmap for becoming stronger in the future through the Network Strengthening Plan.

These intermediate outcomes were explored through the four following sub-questions:

1. In your opinion, did the NSP contribute to MANASO’s ability to adapt its approach to better achieve its objectives within its operating environment? If so, what specific components of the NSP were most useful? If not, why not?
2. If applicable, what process did MANASO use to adapt its program management to its operating environment?
3. What were the results of MANASO’s mid-course change in focus between Workshops I and II?
4. How will the activities that MANASO is currently conducting contribute to achieving the intermediate outcomes it established in Workshop II?

5. **Methodology**

The LMG Project staff followed the methodology for case study evaluation as described in *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Robert Yin, 2014, 5th edition). The case study was structured as an explanatory single-case analysis, consisting of seven key informant interviews and one focus group discussion (FGD), all of which were conducted immediately following the third NSP workshop and results presentation with MANASO in May 2016.

**Data Collection**

A targeted literature review and review of MANASO’s documents collected during the preliminary phase (e.g. constitutions, strategic plans, etc.) provided the background for developing the interview questions, and the pre-NSP self-assessment provided context within which the case study interviews were analyzed.

Seven individuals (listed in Annex 2) participated in 60-90 minute key informant interviews. An additional nine MANASO members who participated in the NSP workshop but were not designated for key informant interviews took part in the two-hour FGD. In addition to the key informant interviews and the FGD, data was gleaned from a MANASO document review and pre-program member self-assessment that had already been completed.

**Data Analysis**

With written consent from participants, the interviews and the FGD were recorded, notes were transcribed, and findings were synthesized across the interviews. The LMG Project staff utilized Nvivo, a qualitative analysis software program, to code the transcripts from the interviews and the FGD using an inductive approach, distilling common themes and subsequently drawing conclusions about the program’s effects.

The coding framework used for data analysis was based on the NSP Facilitator Guide, which suggested five main themes for coding: member benefits and relations; distributed leadership; governance; financial systems and sustainability; and communications for resource mobilization. Additional codes were developed for themes identifying barriers to achieving desired results; enabling factors for achieving desired results; sustainability; and NSP program delivery.

The analysis of the interviews and the FGD was conducted in three phases:

**Phase 1: Analyzing and coding the first batch of transcribed interview notes and extracting recurring themes according to the coding framework.** The first batch of interview transcripts consisted of five interviews totaling 65 pages of text. The transcripts were uploaded into Nvivo, reviewed by interview question across all of the interviews, and then coded according to themes. Finally, coded text was extracted from Nvivo and manually reviewed for
additional emergent themes.

**Phase 2: Coding the second and final batch of transcribed interview notes and extracting recurring themes according to the coding framework.** The second batch of transcripts included one interview and the FGD, totaling 41 pages of text. Because the first batch of transcripts had already been coded and extracted from Nvivo, coding for the second batch was done manually following the same process. That is, transcripts were reviewed by interview question, coded according to themes, and reviewed again for additional emergent themes.

**Phase 3: Synthesizing themes from both batches of transcribed notes and development of an outline of the findings and results.** After analysis of all transcripts was completed (one interview could not be transcribed due to the LMG Project staff attrition and time constraints), results from both batches were synthesized according to theme and an outline of the findings was developed.

**Limitations**
Due to ongoing changes in the implementation of the NSP with MANASO, the case study evaluation was planned and conducted toward the end of the program. Although the approach to the case study was informed by the literature review, theory of change, document review, and baseline member self-assessment, the scope was limited and retrospective because implementation of the NSP was well underway. In addition, while LMG Project staff designed and conducted the case study with integrity and sensitivity to bias, the key informant interviews and the FGD were conducted by the same LMG Project staff who implemented the NSP. The LMG Project staff mitigated the potential for bias in this situation by requesting that respondents be open and honest with criticisms to improve project learning, and by engaging a colleague who had not participated in the program to analyze the data and synthesize the findings. Lastly, inasmuch as case study research explores the complexity of a single or small number of specific cases, these findings are not generalizable or representative of trends in a broader population.

### 6. Results and Findings
Thematic analysis of the coded interview transcripts yielded several areas of findings related to the NSP and MANASO on the whole. This section presents the results and findings, categorized by the themes that were identified.

**The Network Strengthening Program**
Findings related to the NSP focus on the structure of the program, how network members are selected to participate in the workshops, and ensuring participation during and in between workshop sessions.

**Designing, planning, and implementing the workshops and sessions**
When asked their opinions of the design of the NSP, the practicality of the training materials, and their experience with the trainers, most respondents expressed that the workshop content was well structured and comprehensive, and that the facilitation was well done. One respondent said that presentations and other materials were, “Well-articulated, well-presented, up-to-date… and relevant.”

---

1 Interviewee 1.2
Several respondents felt that the facilitation approach was adaptable, diverse, and engaging, noting that it ranged from hands-on exercises to action-oriented sessions. This approach to facilitation created a sense of equity amongst participants in terms of their comprehension, allowing for attentiveness to individual needs and encouragement to all participants (especially quieter ones) to chime in.

Although respondents agreed that the program was effective, several mentioned that the time allotted for the workshops was insufficient, meaning in particular that participants could not fully absorb the content of one session before having to move on to the next.

**Selecting participants to attend the workshops**

The LMG Project team and MANASO sought to select participants for the NSP workshops who represented network members on the whole. The NSP presented a valuable opportunity for selected participants to work more closely with each other, the secretariat, and members of the board. The relationships and interactions among participants in the NSP revealed some important lessons for the wider network.

Respondents said that working through the NSP revealed MANASO’s need to strengthen ties with network member organizations large and small, increase collaboration amongst members, provide more technical support, and share resources. The vast majority of network members come from community-based organizations (CBOs) and, as several participants mentioned, there had been minimal interaction with the secretariat and fellow members prior to these workshops. The NSP provided an opportunity for participants to become better acquainted with other MANASO members and leadership alike. However, while respondents reported that meeting other MANASO members was a valuable experience, some felt that the workshop was too narrowly tailored to the secretariat’s needs, which ultimately influenced the selection of participants.

Although the dynamic between participants was positive, some respondents expressed difficulty in selecting only 15 network members to participate in the workshops out of more than 500 active members. Other respondents thought that the heads of the member organizations were not necessarily the most suitable individuals to participate in the NSP; as one respondent explained, “for a network… the owner is not the secretariat. The owner of the network is the members, ideally.”

Once the workshop series was in progress, the LMG Project team advised against changing participants, because the content and action plans developed in each session are progressive; thus, to ensure comprehension and continuity of the work, the same participants should be present in all three NSP workshops.

**Ensuring participants’ contributions during and in between the workshops**

The NSP gathered MANASO members from diverse backgrounds, sectors, and roles. Engagement of participants during and after each workshop was vital to ensuring that activities were completed and desired outcomes achieved.

A few respondents mentioned that throughout the workshop, different participants took the lead in making certain that action items were completed and the necessary follow-through occurred. In addition, the LMG Project team collected post-workshop evaluation forms, and followed up with

---

1 Interviewee 4.1

Network Strengthening Program Case Study Report (July 2017)
participants about their progress on action plans after each workshop, all of which respondents said was helpful. With this information, facilitators were able to check participants’ understanding and reinforce learning objectives through email exchanges and WhatsApp group messages with participants. Participants were able to share challenges they encountered upon returning to their organizations and communities, and then received timely feedback and support from facilitators in overcoming them.

The related challenges most frequently mentioned by respondents were unreliable telecommunications throughout the country; trouble collaborating with other participants from a distance; competing work priorities and responsibilities; and difficulties getting participants to refocus on action plans following each workshop. The first workshop was particularly challenging to deliver because it was conducted shortly before the holiday season and a number of participants went on personal leave. Following their return to work, several respondents acknowledged that they struggled to recall what they had learned and the commitments they had made.

Lastly, the contribution of some participants was hindered because of their limited comprehension of English. One respondent reported the need to devote time to translating NSP materials into the local language (Chichewa) and re-explaining NSP concepts to some participants. Other respondents agreed that language abilities should be an important consideration in the selection of NSP participants.

**MANASO**

Findings regarding MANASO clustered around the network’s financial sustainability, reinvigorating its membership, governing the network, and communicating both internally and to external audiences.

**Sustaining the network financially**

Like other HIV and AIDS support networks in Malawi, MANASO historically relied on the National AIDS Commission (NAC) of Malawi for most of its funding. Over the past couple of years, however, the NAC experienced interruptions in its funding from the Government of Malawi and international donors, and consequently significantly cut its support of MANASO. MANASO faced a great deal of financial uncertainty that strained its operations as the network worked to diversify its donor base and secure other sources of funding.

When asked to describe the financial sustainability of MANASO, all respondents mentioned that it would continue to be a major concern and challenge for the network until an alternate means of funding could be identified. As one respondent described:

> The financial sustainability [of MANASO] is below average at the moment. Other dimensions of sustainability I think are better, like purpose… and network strength. Things like that are better off, but financially I think it’s… frightening.³

In addition, a few respondents indicated that there was concern about how MANASO’s limited funds were being spent. Respondents suggested that there was a perception among some that only a select group of members was benefiting from MANASO’s funding; specifically, that funding was used to the benefit of the network’s leadership rather than its members on the whole:

³ Interviewee 4.1
The lack of resources...is really failing to reach or to assist its members well. Only a few are really benefiting...the regional committees or maybe district chairpersons are the ones attending most of the workshops.4

The number of members who renew their membership by paying dues each year is considered one indicator of network solvency. According to MANASO’s executive director despite the fact that compliance with paying annual dues was very low in recent years, 2015 was a record year for MANASO—it brought in new leadership, raised awareness of the network’s activities, and, consequently, over 50% of members paid their dues by the end of the year. However, MANASO saw the number of paid-up members stall in 2016. As of June 2016, it was estimated that less than 20% of members had paid their annual dues. Respondents noted various reasons why members may choose to not pay dues, including a lack of financial resources, competing priorities, or the notion that MANASO would not meet their needs.

Notably, the procedures surrounding payment of membership dues were not firmly established; therefore, members paid dues voluntarily and on a rolling basis throughout the year. This caused a number of respondents to feel that the dues process was unfair, because, regardless of their payment status, all members were able to access and utilize network benefits (such as participating in district forums, workshops, and funding opportunities) throughout the year. One respondent expressed:

*Membership for MANASO is a yearly thing. It doesn’t matter when you pay, provided that in the year you are expected to subscribe. So far we have...these others [that] are still unpaid members. I am expecting them to pay because we are still mobilizing them to do the payment, as we are still in the operational year. [However,] it is well appreciated and anticipated that they should be paying at the beginning of the year for programming purposes, because if we open the door for everyone to be paying at will, it means one will be paying in December when the year ends. Therefore, for the secretariat to do the programming it would be very difficult.*5

Although the secretariat was supporting its members through capacity building, community engagement, and restoring regional boards, providing benefits to such a vast network of members was costly and unsustainable on member dues alone; even with all members paid-up. Respondents suggested that members could not afford to pay higher dues since the majority was from small, local CBOs. As one respondent said, “We know that for member dues, even though it’s a little amount, for most communities it’s still...not easy to mobilize that amount when they have other competing priorities.”6

Through the NSP module on financial systems and sustainability, participants discussed how to more actively engage network members and foster a sense of ownership to improve MANASO’s financial outlook. Most respondents agreed that MANASO must have more financial support from its members to ensure long-term sustainability, which would come mainly through full payment of member dues. Many respondents, like the one cited below, felt that the responsibility to search for external funding sources fell on the secretariat.

*Since it’s a network, I would say financial sustainability would come from the network itself. Members have to give whatever they have in order to make MANASO move, while at the same*
time the board and secretariat [look] for other external resources to come in so that we can work with our network better.  

Reinvigorating the network's members

MANASO’s financial challenges undoubtedly affected the engagement of its members. As mentioned above, network members seemed to view MANASO’s board and secretariat as responsible for mobilizing funds for its membership. This primary focus on the financial benefits of the network became problematic when members expected to continue receiving the same benefits despite the financial turbulence MANASO experienced when NAC funding withered.

Members were able to get, maybe, funding from other sources, like [directly from] NAC. But when NAC ceased to give funding to the members…their only hope for funding was MANASO. But as I have said, MANASO is going through a process where they didn't have funding as well, so it is like the members were in a predicament to say, “I think it’s MANASO that has to give us funding,” but then MANASO had no money. So I feel that’s the complication.

A few respondents said they believed the secretariat was expecting members to become active in the network and contribute in whatever capacity they can. These differing expectations around MANASO’s responsibilities toward its members and the members’ commitments to MANASO proved challenging for the network to navigate. In addition to securing member dues and mobilizing new donors and resources, MANASO was also considering ways to increase volunteering among its members for certain activities that could be implemented with little or no funding. Some respondents suggested that this could be a way to reemphasize the importance of members’ financial commitment to the network and to increase their sense of ownership.

Several respondents noted the challenge with members feeling a lack of ownership of the network and, relatedly, low levels of engagement and payment of dues. One respondent explained:

The majority [of members] were starting from a point of no ownership and then through…the Network Strengthening Program…they developed ownership. But, for me, it was too late. The ownership developed at the end. If the baseline had been switched, I think the results would have been even [better].

Many respondents expressed hope that members would realize the value of affiliating with MANASO and choose to be engaged in strengthening the network. MANASO members work across many health areas and at various levels (community, district, national, etc.), so the network was a valuable space for collaboration and resource sharing.

[MANASO’s mission and vision] is very relevant, because we work as a network. We have the voice, especially for those that have no voice. We are [talking] about community-based organizations and some local organizations that wouldn’t have spoken [and] couldn’t have stood on their own, but because of being a network they are able now to express themselves fully. MANASO has been coordinating very well with the community based organizations that are working directly with the communities, and they have also been doing capacity building with

---

7 Interviewee 2.1
8 Interviewee 3.1
9 Interviewee 4.1
these people, and these are the people who are directly implementing the projects. Most of the offices are in town, but MANASO had membership directly in the communities, which creates operational room for liaising to do the actual job that is required to respond to the impact of HIV and AIDS plus the other opportunistic diseases.\textsuperscript{10}

Another respondent succinctly explained: “Being part of [the] network means you are part of that family.”\textsuperscript{11}

MANASO had begun implementing strategies to ensure that members were able to actively participate in the network and build their sense of ownership of it. For example, the secretariat reinforced the message that annual dues are one of the commitments that members must make in exchange for the benefits they receive from the network. However, as membership in the network is voluntary, payment of dues cannot easily be enforced. During the NSP workshops, participants decided that MANASO should focus on paid-up members and prioritize their needs.

\textit{Some of the discussions we are having with the secretariat [are about making] sure that the members who are paying to MANASO — who are loyal to MANASO — get more benefit in terms of information, interaction, but also other opportunities so to make sure that they should feel the benefit of [belonging] to this network}.\textsuperscript{12}

Members who had not paid dues would not be completely excluded from benefits, but would have limited access to network resources until they paid their annual dues. For example, while unpaid members would still receive network communications, they would not be included in network decision-making or receive opportunities for external projects.

\textbf{Governing the network}

MANASO was at an important juncture because its strategic plan, with a mission and vision heavily focused on HIV and AIDS, was set to expire. MANASO’s leadership needed to rethink the direction of the network, taking into consideration its members’ expectations and the challenging funding environment.

The NSP program gave participants the opportunity to learn more about how to reposition MANASO and promote its value to donors and to the populations it serves. Participants reviewed the network’s mission and vision, and decided to revamp the mission and vision so they were more relevant and responsive to current developments in the field, and so they complemented the government’s policies and initiatives.

The secretariat also began outlining a new “transparent governance” mechanism whereby it would provide technical and administrative support to members and manage overarching network issues in a way that would more actively engage members. The secretariat increased its presence and accessibility to its members by conducting frequent site visits, and planned to continue these visits on a quarterly basis as a key component of network oversight.

Using concepts and tools from the NSP, MANASO recognized that members could support the network’s leadership in identifying strengths and areas for improvement for which action plans could

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Interviewee 1.2
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Focus Group Discussion participant
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Interviewee 3.2
\end{itemize}
then be devised to “[turn weaknesses] into strengths.” However, one respondent reported that the secretariat was understaffed and, despite being highly skilled, was overstretched. This respondent went on to explain that the board of directors had made great efforts to retain those staff members, and acknowledged that they were overqualified and undercompensated.

I think they could have run away, but I’ve tried to maintain them so that they help out this great national network because once you lose these highly-qualified individuals and we have weak staff, then the network will be weak as well. So, I hope…we still maintain the same staff [and] they don’t run away, even though we’re paying them almost nothing…. Sooner or later, we might have the necessary support so that these great individuals are able to work in this network.

Another challenge in governing the network was the distinct needs of its two main types of member organizations: local CBOs and larger NGOs. One respondent highlighted the importance of the NSP’s distributed leadership approach in strengthening leaders at various levels; using evidence for decision-making; and making decisions that benefit the network as a whole.

Leadership, mostly the distributed leadership – that was a nice piece. How can [we] make sure that we have distributed leadership at the different levels? Sometimes leaders, they fear that when they distribute leadership, they’re taking away their power. But it is more a strength. As a leader, you don’t just leave things the way [they are]. You have to make sure that the proper thing is done. My belief is: what is the better good? Are people going to benefit or be injured [by] the decision [I’ve] come up with? If I found evidence that the issue I’m trying is of better good, I push it. If I found in my sense, in my thinking, and with the evidence I have, that it will bring more misery to the people we are trying to serve, then I don’t do it. So, the NSP program provided the platform – the information – for a leader.

Communicating with internal and external stakeholders

Most respondents felt that MANASO’s external, high-level communications (to the government, international donors, United Nations agencies, etc.) were efficient. However, at lower levels, the communication chain was disorganized and responsibilities were unclear.

Many respondents acknowledged logistical challenges with intra-network communications due to geographical distance, weak country communication systems, and a lack of dedicated resources. Network members often relied on various means to reach one another, including email, SMS messaging, and word of mouth. Notably, less than 50% of MANASO’s members had access to email.

We’re spread all over Malawi, and for us to come together to manage assignments with colleagues, with a lack of technology [to] share information easily, it becomes difficult for us…. It means you have to sacrifice your resources…you cannot do this type of work through [the] phone.

---

13 Focus Group Discussion participant
14 Interviewee 3.2
15 Interviewee 3.2
16 Focus Group Discussion participant
In an attempt to mitigate some internal communications challenges, the secretariat created an email address that would allow it to communicate more easily with members who had paid dues, as a new benefit. Members were not overwhelmed with information, but would receive news on a need-to-know basis, such as communications about relevant initiatives, meetings, and trainings. Correspondence to members often relayed information from donors about topics such as funding opportunities and international policy changes. However, one communications hurdle was that these messages were mostly disseminated in English, although many members (particularly from the local CBOs) did not have strong English language skills.

While most respondents agreed that MANASO’s secretariat had improved greatly in its internal communications with members over the past years, MANASO’s leadership was often unaware of member activities underway at the local or district levels because information was not reported back up. Contributing to this, since MANASO’s member organizations often pursued funding from various sources, members were not always forthcoming with information about their work if they believed sharing might weaken their advantage over competitors.

The information from MANASO to the members is okay, but…we have not yet devised a system [for] how members could also be reporting some of [their activities] to MANASO. We should develop our own reporting system, where membership has to [send] information to MANASO; that MANASO has to be updated on whatever developments are happening from the network members.  

Although MANASO had not yet devised a system for reporting up to the secretariat, NSP participants viewed this as one of the responsibilities of membership that could be expanded. One respondent described taking a very direct approach to discussing the two-way flow of communications between MANASO and its members:

Looking at the [NSP] survey which took place, [on] benefits, and obligations…I’ve been talking to some of the members whom I meet…. I normally ask, "What’s your contribution to the network, apart from paying subscription? Or apart from the network inviting you to meetings? Do you report back to the network? The network needs information from you."

MANASO had recently established regional and district forums to share information more widely with other network members. One respondent explained:

We started with the regional forums. Then [we noticed] that we have left a gap, because not every district member is part of this regional forum because of distance and means of communication. So that’s when we went back and established the district forums…establishing those district forums was to widen the communication means between the members.

Respondents reported that many members had also established their own means of member-to-member communication, such as through regional email addresses, Facebook groups, WhatsApp groups, and phone chains. These various communications strategies played an important role in fostering a sense of inclusion and collaborative engagement amongst network members.

---

17 Interviewee 1.2
18 Interviewee 3.2
19 Interviewee 3.1
All the members of MANASO, they know what's going on in the NSP program, but also other programs and other policy programs which [we] have been in…. In terms of information sharing, I think that we've done a lot over the year through the current leadership to make sure that MANASO members are updated on what's going on…but it's a matter of how can they participate in those forums.20

Regarding MANASO’s external communications, a few respondents admitted that they would not consider the network to be highly visible among donors and international agencies as a vital national network of HIV and AIDS service organizations. Although MANASO did receive media coverage for larger events (such as regional meetings and World AIDS Day events), there was limited coverage for its standard activities. According to one respondent, partners had expressed a lack of familiarity with MANASO and its mission, but the respondent stated that the network had recently improved its external communications efforts.

Several respondents said that it was helpful to learn through NSP how to analyze audiences and tailor communications methods and messages.

Mostly when we are communicating to people, we know our audience, but we do not know how to approach them. So, we were told how to approach them – what kind of modes to use. I think that has really helped me personally. I have to analyze who I’m about to talk to, how I’m about to deliver my message.21

MANASO representatives had been invited to participate in events and forums with PEPFAR, other international donors, and government agencies. One respondent recalled:

I remember when the Global Fund was initiating its programs; MANASO was very much involved as one of the CSO representatives. MANASO has also attended PEPFAR COP 15, COP 16… so I’m sure that is because MANASO has been seen as an effective organization in terms of its operations.22

MANASO was also asked to collaborate on rebuilding regional networks in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). These invitations with key stakeholders and potential donors highlighted for MANASO the importance of continuing to improve network communications internally and externally.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

In concluding the interviews, respondents were asked for their thoughts on the likelihood that concepts learned through the NSP would continue to be implemented, as well as share opinions on the way forward for MANASO. The following recommendations were distilled from respondents’ perspectives.

The Network Strengthening Program

Respondents provided feedback on the overall planning, design, and implementation of the NSP, from which the following recommendations were synthesized.

20 Interviewee 3.2
21 Interviewee 1.3
22 Interviewee 1.2
• Extend the follow-up period beyond six months. Respondents felt that 9 to 12 months was a more reasonable time frame for completing action plans.
• Provide ongoing, longer-term support through platforms that could help members continue to address network issues, such as e-learning modules or additional in-country workshops.
• Provide support such as meals, travel, phone credits, and Wi-Fi for NSP participants who are geographically dispersed, but must meet occasionally to collaborate on work.
• Include a workshop session on developing a strong network constitution.
• Involve a consultative group of network member representatives in the NSP preparatory work.
• Consider local holidays when planning, and/or plan for refresher sessions following holidays.
• Expand the criteria for selecting workshop participants, particularly to include language skills.
• Develop structured plans for knowledge transfer from workshop participants to the wider network membership, especially in case the participants attending each workshop change.
• Allocate more time for discussions, presentations, and group work so that participants have more time to dive deeply into NSP topics.

While there was still much work to be done, respondents felt that the NSP prepared them for tackling the difficult decisions that needed to be made to strengthen the network. All respondents said they believed that the primary objectives of the NSP were achieved, and several observed that there had been notable positive changes in participants’ personal perspectives, particularly around soft skills such as facilitation, flexible planning, and adaptability. One respondent explained that the program helped participants foster a sense of ownership of the network, specifying that they learned how to lead by example and also learned that they “should not oppress others because we’re in the leadership position.”23 Respondents agreed that the NSP enabled them to analyze the network’s current state, their desired goals, and the actions necessary to attain those goals.

MANASO

Respondents shared their perspectives on MANASO’s current situation and future opportunities, as well as their recommendations for continuing to strengthen the network going forward. The following recommendations were synthesized from respondents’ comments.

Member support and engagement

• Create a member database to record and track payment of annual dues.
• Survey network members who have not paid their dues to better understand their reasons. Use the findings to modify the support and benefits MANASO provides to paid-up versus non-paid-up members.
• Establish a firm deadline for payment of membership dues for consistent monitoring and activity planning.
• Create mechanisms for member recognition through certificates or other awards.

Network processes, systems, and collaboration

• Consider conducting a periodic member survey to ensure that MANASO leadership accurately captures information about members’ activities and opinions.
• Explore ways to engage new leaders from different levels of the network to gain unique insights on network activities, challenges, and opportunities.

23 Interviewee 1.2
• Create a reporting system for members to share updates on activities with MANASO leadership, particularly those activities that contribute to MANASO’s goals and overall mission.
• Reach out to partners, stakeholders, the Malawian government, and donors to increase the visibility of MANASO and create new opportunities for collaboration.

Network communications

• Send correspondence from MANASO leadership to members through various channels, both in English and Chichewa (local language), to ensure that messages reach and are understood by all members.
• Continue to encourage and expand on internal engagement of network members through various mechanisms, including in-person (site visits, regional and district forums, etc.) and virtually (phone, email, Facebook groups, etc.).

The determination of MANASO’s leadership to see the network succeed was seen in its efforts to improve internal communications; strengthen network governance and leadership at all levels; and increase member engagement. Many respondents felt that MANASO members would strengthen the network by sharing information through regional and district forums; visiting one another to collaborate on activities; and offering technical assistance to fellow members.

Several respondents noted that the board had committed to ensuring that the initiatives MANASO began during the NSP would continue after the program was completed. One respondent explained:

_We will not go home the same. We will not operate our programs the same. We will not lead the same. We will not manage the same. We will not govern the same. We will do better than we [did] before the NSP._\(^{24}\)

A few respondents credited the NSP with enhancing members’ individual capacities as well as the capacity of the network on the whole. NSP concepts such as clarifying roles and responsibilities, managing expectations, and undertaking cost-savings approaches for activities were found to be practical and highly relevant approaches for MANASO and individual member organizations to institute. One respondent captured this sentiment succinctly: “What [NSP] has done for MANASO, it should not end…. It’s the beginning to make MANASO successful.”\(^{25}\)

---

\(^{24}\) Interviewee 1.2

\(^{25}\) Interviewee 2.1
Annex 1. Interview Protocol – Lines of Inquiry

Instructions to the Interviewer

In preparation, please ensure that you have read the above background information before beginning the interview. Review the survey responses submitted by the program and complete the fields highlighted in yellow below.

When you begin the interview, greet the interviewee and introduce yourself. Next, read the sentences in italics below. After that, you may proceed through the questions, recording your notes, and using the probes to follow up as needed.

Thank you for taking about an hour to talk with us today about the Network Strengthening Program. As you may know, the Leadership, Management, and Governance (LMG) Project, funded by USAID, is conducting the Network Strengthening Program (NSP), a new capacity building program tailored to address common challenges faced by networks. The objective of the program is to improve the functionality of networks so they are more effective at meeting the needs of their members. To achieve this goal, the content of the program is focused around five distinct challenge areas identified through a literature review and a series of interviews with network stakeholders:

- Network membership and benefits
- Distributed leadership
- Network governance
- Network financial management
- Communications for resource mobilization

Once a network is identified, the NSP tailors the content and focus areas of the workshop series according to the priorities of the network, using the results from a document review, member self-assessment survey, and network mapping.

As a key stakeholder in MANASO’s work with HIV and AIDS organizations in Malawi, we would like to ask for your feedback, which is vital in helping us understand how effective the program is. There are no right or wrong answers to any questions that I ask. Please be honest and open. If you do not know the answer to a question, I would appreciate if you could direct me to someone else and I will be happy to set up a call with them.

We would like to record this interview. We will make sure that we share anything that we write with you so you have a chance to make any corrections.

[Hit ‘Record’ on the voice-recorder or software.]

[Read either one as appropriate:]

- Thank you for signing your consent form before this interview. You gave us permission to record the interview, so we will proceed with the recording.
- We did not receive a signed consent form to record this interview. Do you give us permission to record this interview?

We are excited to hear your feedback on the NSP and MANASO’s work, and ask for you to discuss any strengths and weaknesses openly and honestly. We will begin the interview by asking some basic
questions about MANASO, and then discuss the Network Strengthening Program and outcomes in greater depth.

Name of interviewee: 
Name of organization: 
Type or category of organization: (example: government, community-based organization, local NGO, international NGO, not applicable, other (please specify))
Position: 

[Following are general questions that should be tailored to the perspective of the informants, based on the nature of their involvement. Questions should be asked in an open-ended manner to avoid suggesting any particular answer.]

**Questions about MANASO**
1. What is the nature of your work in the HIV and AIDS sector in Malawi?
2. In what way does your organization/agency work with MANASO specifically?
3. In what way do you personally work with MANASO, in your role?
4. In your opinion, how relevant is MANASO’s vision and mission to its operating environment? How do you know?
5. In your opinion, how appropriate is MANASO’s vision and mission to its work?
6. In your opinion, how effective are MANASO’s external communications? (Think about communications to stakeholders, donors, etc.)
7. How would you describe the financial sustainability of MANASO?

**Questions about the NSP**
8. Did you attend the Network Strengthening Program Results Presentation by MANASO on May 26, 2016?
9. What do you believe is the primary objective of the NSP? Was it achieved? Why or why not?
10. In your opinion, how appropriate, or not, was the design of the NSP to the context of HIV and AIDS networks in Malawi? Please explain.

11. In your opinion, what content should a future program to strengthen networks in Malawi cover?

We explained that the goal of the NSP is to improve the functionality of networks so they are more effective at meeting the needs of their members and adapting their organizational management to the context of their operating environment. Now we will ask you some questions about what you were able to observe as far as MANASO’s operational changes over the past nine months.

Questions about Outcomes from the NSP

12. What have been the major barriers/constraints to MANASO’s ability to operate in the HIV and AIDS sector in Malawi over the past nine months? These may be internal or external to the network itself. Please elaborate.

13. What have been the enabling factors for MANASO’s ability to operate in HIV and AIDS sector in Malawi over the past nine months? These may be internal or external to the network itself. Please elaborate.

14. Have you observed any changes in behaviors (e.g. leadership, management, governance) of MANASO’s leadership or members over the past nine months? If so, please specify.

15. Have you observed any changes in organizational practices (e.g. leadership, management, governance) of MANASO over the past nine months? If so, please specify.

Concluding Questions

Thank you very much for your time!

28. Do you have any additional comments that you would like to share that were not covered in the questions?

Do you have any questions for us?
Annex 2. List of Key Informants and FGD Participants

LMG Project staff conducted key informant interviews and a focus group discussion with members of MANASO to gain perspective on the extent to which the implementation of the NSP is linked to program effects.

Key informants included:

- Abigail Dzimadzi, Executive Director, MANASO
- Agnes Mangoche, Board Member, MANASO
- Huxley Kankwamba, District Chairperson, MANASO
- Kulimba Chiotcha, Drug Fight Malawi
- Maziko Matemba, Chairman of the Board, MANASO
- Phillip Mthobwa, Board Member, MANASO
- Silent Mtambo, Ebenezer Foundation

Participants in the focus group discussion included:

- Blessings Agwangwanya, Vision for Development Foundation
- Gift Mwale, Board Member, MANASO
- Gladstone Alfred Kachale, District Chairperson, MANASO
- Godfrey Kammunda, Board Member, MANASO
- Kingsley Chasanga, Program Manager, MANASO
- Mwandida Mwahedi, Masangano CBO
- Norah Tsoka, Pheza CBO
- Ololade Osunsanya, Project Assistant, MANASO
- Philemon Kavala, Regional Committee Member, MANASO