



# Improving Continuous Monitoring of UHC Processes in Sub-Saharan Africa

## *Lessons learned from the process documentation methodology*

*Authors: Kéfilath Bello, Luc Kouwanou, Hashim Hounkpatin, Conrad Tonoukouen, Grace Kiwanuka, Seyni Mbaye, Cheickna Touré, Allison Kelley, Jean-Paul Dossou*

### Introduction

Policy analysis helps government actors, activists, researchers, development actors, and other stakeholders understand how, under whose influence, and why certain policies are adopted or enacted and what the effects of these policies are and why [1]. Policy analysis traditionally has two aspects: 1) retrospective analysis of the policy process, primarily to generate knowledge about the process, and 2) prospective analysis, primarily to determine how to influence the ongoing policy process [1].

Prospective policy analysis seeks to understand the unfolding political economy environment of policy change in order to support more effective stakeholder engagement in policy processes and the successful design and implementation of policies. Despite calls for prospective policy analysis and growing recognition of its importance in the health sector [2], it is still underutilized, including for universal health coverage (UHC) processes. Key barriers to carrying out prospective policy analysis include low capacity to undertake the analysis and challenges to performing real-time documentation [2].

From the outset, the African Collaborative for Health Financing Solutions (ACS) project has focused on providing relevant and contextualized evidence to support country-led UHC processes, including for continuous learning and adaptation [3]. In doing so, the ACS team developed a process documentation (PD) methodology to help country facilitators carry out real-time documentation of UHC processes and prospective policy analysis. This methodology was first tested by the ACS team in Uganda and then progressively adopted and enriched in other countries (Namibia, Botswana, Benin, Togo, and Burkina Faso).

### Objectives

This paper describes the PD methodology and draws lessons from its implementation in order to improve both the methodology and its application.

### Methodology for the Report

To develop this paper, we used data from the following sources:

- Minutes from regular check-in calls in which ACS team members (including those involved in PD) discussed the methodology and the results and the lessons learned from various ACS activities
- Reports from PD reviews in Benin, Botswana, and Namibia,

- Document reviews, including PD reports and knowledge products and ACS project reports
- Data collected from the PD implementers in all the six countries through two online surveys (in August and November 2020), Zoom calls, and face-to-face discussions (in November and December 2020).

We performed a content analysis of the data collected from these sources and divided the feedback into two categories: 1) issues pointing to the need for better information and coaching for the PD teams, and 2) feedback on the successes, failures, and challenges of the PD methodology itself and the improvements needed. In this paper, we focus on the second set of feedback.

## Description of the Process Documentation Technique

The PD methodology systematically captures and analyzes events, key stakeholder characteristics, and interactions throughout a UHC policy process, to learn from and improve this process. Each event or stakeholder characteristic is an elementary unit of information to be examined during the process. These units are like pieces of a puzzle that come together in the end to reveal a full picture, thereby advancing understanding of the UHC policy process. The PD methodology can thus support prospective policy analysis and continuous learning to advance UHC in each country.

Walt and Gilson's policy triangle [4] is the main conceptual framework underpinning the PD methodology. Indeed, this framework enables the systematic consideration of four elements that interact during policy processes: the content of the policy, the processes in place for the development and implementation of the policy, the actors involved, and the context in which the policy is formulated and implemented. The PD tools and the analytical approach used to understand the process draw heavily on this policy triangle and also use a political economy analysis lens to further explore how the ideas, interests, positions, and power of various actors can shape the process being studied.

The PD approach typically has four steps: 1) preparation, 2) recording of key events and stakeholders, 3) periodic desk analysis of a set of records, and 4) in-depth analysis of a set of records to answer a specific policy question.

### Preparation

The first step of PD circumscribes the process to be documented. A varied and complimentary team is put in place and trained on the approach. In the ACS project, PD actors include 1) the PD team, 2) the PD coaches, and 3) the PD mentors.

The PD country team ensures data are collected and analyzed periodically. This team is made up of various members who are involved as documenters, analysts, and data quality insurers, among other roles. The team is led by a team lead who is responsible for ensuring that PD is implemented rigorously in their setting and oversees the quality of the data collected. The documenter is a person who is involved in the policy process or works closely with those in charge of the policy process. This person takes primary responsibility for recording events and stakeholder characteristics on a consistent basis. The documenter is often supported by other people on the ACS country team. PD coach is part of the ACS regional team and serves as initial touchpoints and guides for country teams when questions and concerns arise. The PD coach closely supports the country team in curating and analyzing the data. PD mentors are seasoned advisors with multi-country contextual knowledge within the ACS regional team; they provide strategic guidance when questions and issues from country teams are elevated by the PD coach. The PD coaches and mentors have strong research and analytical capacities, especially in policy analysis.

### Recording of the key events and stakeholders

The key events and the features of the stakeholders in a given process are recorded in a systematic, descriptive, and timely fashion. In the PD methodology, an *event* is an elementary unit of the process

for which a structured set of information is collected to understand the dynamics or development of the process. In Benin, for instance, ACS documented, from July 2019 to December 2020, the process of implementing the pilot phase of the country's new health insurance scheme [5]. During this pilot phase, each decision (such as conducting a costing of the health care package for civil servants), each change in the actors involved, or each new contextual development (launch of new health system reforms) was considered an event.

To guide the PD team in prioritizing the events to be documented, ACS distinguished three levels of events. First-level events are those directly linked to the policy process, such as a step in the process or an event with direct impact on the process. In Benin, one first-level event was the launch of the pilot phase of the health insurance scheme. Second-level events are not directly linked to the process but might have a more or less direct impact on it. In Benin, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was a second-level event during implementation of the pilot phase. Third-level events are contextual events that might have an impact or might help elucidate underlying determinants of the decisions made or the results of the policy process. An example of a third-level event was the terrorist attack that happened in northern Benin (an implementation area of the health insurance) in February 2020. First-level events are the top priority for documentation. The PD team should also make reasonable efforts to document all second-level events. The team can discuss documenting third-level events that they deem important.

We adopted the definition of *stakeholders* provided by Varvasovszky and Brugha as “actors who have an interest in the issue under consideration, who are affected by the issue, or who – because of their position – have or could have an active or passive influence on the decision-making and implementation processes” [6]. At the onset of the PD process in the countries where ACS tested the methodology, the teams identified the key stakeholders related to the process studied. Additional stakeholders were identified throughout the documentation period. Events and stakeholders were recorded using online tools that guided the recording through a series of open-ended questions. The tools were stored on Google Forms. To avoid privacy issues, the PD teams only recorded information that was publicly available (in meeting reports, online, or through observation). Moreover, access to the databases was granted only to the PD country team, the coaches, and the mentors.

The recording phase is also where the first level of analysis occurs. The person who records the events or stakeholders fills in two specific tabs in the online tool to generate an initial analytical memo and reflect on lessons learned. This “immediate analysis” allows for reflexivity at the level of individual records. Indeed, the recorder is encouraged to carefully think on the meaning of the event or the characteristics of the stakeholder, the links between this event or stakeholder and other events and stakeholders, and on his own position vis-à-vis this event or stakeholder. This reflexivity helps to have a better understanding of the record and to determine if a specific action is needed in short term to improve the process being studied. It also prepares the way for a broader analysis of the events and stakeholders.

A periodic (monthly, for the ACS project) check of the events recorded by the PD team ensures that all relevant events and stakeholders are identified and that appropriate plans are in place to complete the recording.

### **Periodic desk analysis of records**

The third phase consists of a periodic review of the events and stakeholders recorded by the PD team. This review leads to better understanding of the choices made by various actors throughout the process, to identify and understand key achievements and failures, draw lessons, and determine the adaptations needed to improve the process. In the ACS project, this periodic analysis was performed quarterly by the PD country teams, with support from the coaches. The results were discussed with the mentors and other key people from the ACS regional team. During these meetings, ACS country

teams made recommendations on how to better support the process as well as how to improve the PD methodology itself.

### **In-depth analysis of records to answer a specific policy question**

In the fourth phase, the PD team chooses a policy question that is relevant to the country context and uses the PD data, alone or in combination with other data sources, to answer this question. The analysis is qualitative and is supported by the two previous phases. The ACS team performed this type of analysis three times in 2018 and 2019, to draw lessons from and better support the development of a UHC roadmap in Uganda [7,8], and in 2021, to draw lessons from the implementation and functioning of a policy dialogue platform for the health insurance scheme in Benin [9]. The in-depth analyses were carried out by PD coaches and mentors in collaboration with the PD country teams.

## **Achievements**

The main achievements obtained through the application of the PD methodology are listed below.

### ***A database with qualitative data on various UHC processes in sub-Saharan Africa***

From May 2018 to September 2021, 263 entries were recorded in the events log across six countries: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Uganda, Namibia, and Togo. In the stakeholder log, 47 entries were recorded (36 organizations and 11 individuals). This database was used to produce continuous analyses of the documented policy processes and can also be used for further analyses.

### ***A range of processes documented***

In Benin, ACS documented the pilot phase of the government flagship health insurance scheme. In Botswana, it documented improvements in the efficiency of HIV/AIDS investments. In Burkina Faso, it documented a social movement to support the fight against COVID-19. In Uganda, it documented the development of a UHC roadmap. In Namibia, it documented improvements in the efficiency of HIV/AIDS interventions. In Togo, PD was used mainly to perform a stakeholder analysis for establishing UHC policy dialogue [10].

### ***Internal use of PD to support UHC processes***

Two examples best illustrate how ACS country teams used PD to support UHC processes. In Uganda, after a first consultation in October 2017, stakeholders agreed on the need for a UHC roadmap that would integrate priority interventions to move toward UHC and engage all relevant stakeholders in the roadmap's implementation (including those traditionally less involved). ACS facilitated the process of developing this roadmap and introduced the PD methodology to support this facilitation. The ACS country team, with the support of coaches, systematically documented and analyzed key events that occurred throughout the process of developing the roadmap. The team also used publicly available data to document the characteristics of various stakeholders (involved or not) in the development of the roadmap and analyze their role, level of engagement, and interests. In Uganda, the documentation of the roadmap development forced the country team to regularly reflect on their own approach, the meaning of key decisions during the process, the roles of various actors and the best ways to engage them, the influence of contextual events, and so forth. Two in-depth analyses, conducted in 2018 and 2019, helped the team in Uganda to accomplish the following:

- Reflect on country ownership
- Embed the roadmap development into broader UHC and “health for all” policies and initiatives
- Reflect on the functioning and governance of the interministerial committee that was steering the roadmap development process
- Reorient the role of ACS to that of facilitator (not steward)
- Uncover political economy factors that influenced or could influence the roadmap development and implementation (such the powerful role of academics or the value of incentives)
- Reflect on the best ways to engage high-level decision-makers

An analysis report and a PowerPoint presentation are available on the Ugandan case [7,8].

The second example illustrating the internal use of PD by ACS country teams is the documentation of the pilot phase of the health insurance flagship scheme in Benin for which ACS facilitated a multisectoral policy dialogue. Based on field observations, meeting reports, newspaper articles and other public sources, the country team documented events and stakeholders around the implementation of this health insurance pilot. This systematic documentation and the quarterly meetings helped the team identify the most influential events, anticipate changes in stakeholders' roles, and navigate the complex environment around the implementation of the scheme. Early in 2021, the team used the PD data and other sources to conduct an in-depth analysis to draw lessons from the functioning of the policy dialogue platform and to formulate recommendations for its sustainability [9].

### ***A useful facilitation tool for ACS country teams***

The country teams found PD to be useful in facilitating their UHC processes in several ways. Some teams reported that PD helped them keep all events recorded in one place, for easy access and follow-up. They also reported that the regular recording of events prompted them to reflect on and anticipate future events. And, as mentioned earlier, PD helped the teams analyze the policy process and propose concrete actions to stakeholders to improve that process. In Togo and Burkina Faso, for instance, the PD methodology helped the team gain a deeper understanding of key policy issues, stakeholders, and contextual factors. This was instrumental in facilitating policy dialogue in those two countries.

## **Challenges**

Despite the achievements noted above, several challenges remain to be addressed in future phases of PD.

### ***PD remains largely internal to ACS country teams***

Because of the novelty of the methodology and the tools and due to the sensitivity of the processes documented, PD was largely used internally by the ACS teams to guide their work. Moreover, ethical considerations prevented the teams from sharing the databases with external actors. However, the teams discussed the results of their in-depth analyses with key stakeholders and shared them in the form of reports or blogs. Furthermore, the Burkina Faso team succeeded in involving field actors from civil society in data collection for events recording. These field actors were members of the local committees that organized the activities to be documented. They reported key facts on these activities.

To better engage externally with PD, ACS worked to improve the tools and developed instructive materials to build stakeholder capacity for PD, including management of confidentiality aspects of the work.

### ***Differing levels of PD uptake among ACS country teams***

Some country teams embraced PD methodology with more enthusiasm than others did. Consequently, some teams achieved better results than others did. Some team members reported that this was due to an insufficient understanding of the methodology (particularly how to analyze the data recorded) and a poor perception of its value. The ACS regional team tried to address this issue by harmonizing understanding among teams and involving them in the review and refinement of the methodology. The regional team also produced guidance notes and analysis templates.

### ***Overlaps with other monitoring approaches***

PD is part of a broader system that supports monitoring and learning, which means that overlaps sometimes occur between PD and other monitoring methodologies. This was noticed, for instance, in the documentation of events and the production of meeting reports, quarterly project reports, and quarterly PD reviews. This led to a heavier workload for country teams and sometimes produced confusion.



### ***Difficulty accessing timely and accurate information***

Because ACS focused on publicly available data (rather than formal interviews) and because PD was largely conducted by ACS staff, it was sometimes difficult to get the right information about events in which the ACS teams were not directly involved. The teams tried to address these problems through careful documentation and review, field presence when possible, and triangulation. But the involvement of more country stakeholders would have led to the inclusion of more firsthand information. Here again, Burkina Faso's experience of making field actors the documenters was a good practice.

### ***The need to adapt PD tools to the local context***

The PD tools were initially developed to document general policy processes (formulation, implementation, or monitoring). But in some countries, the policy process focused on a particular disease or a particular situation. In Namibia, for instance, where the focus was on documenting specific HIV/AIDS interventions, the team felt that it was difficult to link these interventions to broader UHC processes. In Burkina Faso, the team documented a series of field activities conducted by civil society organizations. They had to adapt the event recording tools to make the questions more relevant to field work and more understandable for the civil society actors involved in reporting the activities.

### ***The time burden of PD***

Identifying the relevant events and stakeholders to document, recording them, and analyzing them proved to be time-consuming. Because the country teams had many other responsibilities, the recording and analysis were sometimes delayed. To address these issues, the PD coaches encouraged the team members to collaborate and to avoid the burden falling on only one person. The coaches also provided support in recording events and stakeholders and, especially, carrying out data analysis. ACS also ensured that specific times were set for pausing, analyzing, and learning from the events recorded.

### ***PD quickly overwhelming frontline teams***

At the beginning of the implementation of PD, there was little emphasis on clearly defining the process to be documented, so the teams tended to document a broad range of events. This led to a vast number of events to be documented and data to analyze. While this large amount of data might be useful to approach data saturation from a policy analysis perspective, it can be difficult for a team on the front lines to manage, because of limited time and only basic research skills. ACS has worked to improve the PD methodology by better defining the boundaries of the policy process to be documented.

### ***Limitations of technology used***

To test the PD methodology, ACS stored the data collection tools on Google Forms. This helped to quickly deploy the tools and generate an online database, but it did not allow for editing of the records that had already been submitted. Also, the recording could not be done offline. Finally, the format of the database (Microsoft Excel for text data) is difficult to handle during data analysis. The ACS team is exploring other technology platforms, such as KoBoCollect.

## **Enablers and Constraints**

The first enabler of the development and implementation of PD was the space the ACS project provided to test the methodology in multiple countries and to learn from it. Many country team members were committed to using the methodology and sharing their successes and failures. The time allocated to regular reviews was also useful. The second enabler was the availability in several countries of ACS institutional partners that could provide research expertise and guarantee the sustainability of such an approach over time (beyond the lifespan of ACS).

The main constraint was the fact that the documentation relied solely on ACS teams and partners. This limited the capacity to get timely firsthand information. It also put a lot of pressure on the teams, which had limited time to devote to PD.

## Lessons learned

The following lessons emerged from the ACS experience in implementing PD.

- **PD is a promising tool for understanding and navigating the complex processes related to UHC.** It is especially useful for facilitating these processes and building institutional memory. People involved in developing, implementing, or analyzing health and UHC policies and interventions can use PD as a practical approach for monitoring, learning, and conducting prospective policy analysis.
- **It is important to clearly define the boundaries of the process.** By precisely defining and framing the process they are following, PD teams can better identify events and stakeholders that are relevant for documentation and those that should be priority. This can save time and resources and also increase the relevance of the information collected. In the ACS project, good definition of the process not only saved time but also helped produce recommendations that country stakeholders could use to improve their actions [9].
- **Appropriate technology is needed to ease data collection and data management.** Real-time documentation requires ease of data collection and data management and the ability to give regular feedback. A platform that allows offline data collection, editing by those who enter data, and secure data storage can enable a broad range of actors to carry out event and stakeholder documentation without compromising data quality and confidentiality.
- **The PD approach is time-consuming, due to the work involved in data recording and periodic analysis.** To ensure the continuity and effectiveness of PD implementation, dedicated PD staff are needed within the country, and they should be provided with the necessary time and resources.
- **It is important to involve field actors as documenters.** This helps to obtain firsthand information and increases the timeliness of data. The experience of the Burkina Faso PD team showed that involving field actors lightens the workload of the PD team and increases the timeliness, scope, and the accuracy of information recorded. It also increases the potential to triangulate the data collected. Therefore, when setting up PD, it can be helpful to inform and train country stakeholders to engage and mobilize them. The ACS project has started training of a broad range of field actors in PD.
- **It is crucial to clearly articulate the added value of PD in improving the process, including for the staff involved.** From the outset, those initiating a PD approach should make explicit the links between the PD outputs and the knowledge needs of country stakeholders (including those who are recording data). The PD teams should attempt to create a virtuous circle through which documenters are the first users of PD outputs.
- **Flexibility helps in adapting the PD methodology to specific country contexts.** The pathway toward UHC differs from one country to one another, despite some similarities across any one region. The process to be documented may therefore not be the same. Country teams should be given the ability to adapt the tools to their own context. ACS expects also that the PD approach will be useful for other policy processes or health projects beyond UHC. PD tools will thus require adaptation to each process of interest.

- **Ethical issues and confidentiality are among most important challenges in PD implementation.** Each country should effectively engage with stakeholders involved in the process being studied, as well as the respective ethical boards, to get to consensus on how to manage these issues in each specific country context.

## Conclusion

The PD methodology greatly contributed to enhancing the facilitation function of ACS country support, while also promoting continuous learning and adaptation. More work remains to be done to improve the methodology, however, especially in terms of simplifying the tools and engaging stakeholders. The ACS project has taken an important step in responding to two key prerequisites of prospective policy analysis [2]: real-time documentation and immediate, continuous learning. As the ACS project concludes in 2022, this work will be carried forward by the institutional partners that were involved in developing and piloting PD, especially *Centre de Recherche en Reproduction Humaine et en Démographie* (CERRHUD). ACS also calls for other interested UHC stakeholders to adopt, adapt, and improve this promising methodology.



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