

Using attendance data in non-medical health interventions:

A case study of Cape Town NPOs



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## ABSTRACT

Within health promotion NPOs, the effective collection, collation and analysis of attendance data can be hugely beneficial to a wide variety of organisational processes. These include the interlinked processes of monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment, as well as broader organisational streamlining, fundraising and safeguarding among others. Despite the various uses that attendance data can serve, many NPOs in the Cape Town area have been failing to either collect it accurately, collate it effectively and efficiently, or to analyse and utilise it in a manner which benefits the organisation. This research project, in the form of a multi-case case study design, sought to investigate the barriers faced by Cape Town NPOs to the effective collection, collation and utilisation of beneficiary attendance data. The study used semi-structured interviews, and respondents included staff from 4 organisations of varying financial means and socio-economic positionalities. Within each organisation, respondents included fieldworkers, Monitoring and Evaluation managers, and upper management in order to gain a wide range of perspectives across the attendance data flow.

Among the findings of this research project, the following factors were reported as being the most significant barriers to the effective collection, collation and utilisation of attendance data: Firstly, respondents reported a lack of funder-borne motivation to collect attendance data at a useful level. This combined with a second factor, a lack of time and human capacity within organisations to engage in activities outside of immediate funding briefs, to push attendance data collection off organisational priority lists. Thirdly, a majority of staff at less-resourced organisations, as well as fieldworkers at well-resourced organisations, did not demonstrate a good understanding of attendance data's different forms or uses. Finally, digital tools which could be used to ameliorate attendance data-related struggles were often prohibitively complicated or expensive for use in the South African context.

This research strongly recommends the revisiting of attendance data's importance by funders, and that those funders provide NPOs with adequate training and tools so that the potentially immense benefits of good quality attendance data are not wasted.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>2. Literature Review</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>3. Conceptualisation of the Research Question</b> .....	<b>12</b>
3.1. Central Research Question.....	12
3.2. Defining ‘NPO’ from a sociological perspective .....	13
<b>4. Methodology</b> .....	<b>16</b>
4.1. Sampling and Data Collection .....	17
4.2. Analysis of Data .....	20
<b>5. Ethics</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>6. Findings</b> .....	<b>24</b>
6.1. Introduction.....	24
6.2. Capacity Barriers.....	26
6.2.1. Capacity barriers at the level of the fieldworker .....	27
6.2.2. Capacity barriers at the level of M+E staff .....	30
6.3. Understanding .....	35
6.3.1. Fieldworker understanding of attendance data .....	36
6.3.2. M+E staff understanding of attendance data.....	39
6.4. Motivation.....	42
6.4.1. Motivations influencing attendance data at the level of data collection (Fieldworkers) .....	42
6.4.2. Motivations influencing attendance data at the level of data collation, analysis and reporting (M+E departments).....	45
6.5. Conclusion .....	49
<b>7. Discussion</b> .....	<b>52</b>
7.1. Introductory note .....	52
7.2. Capacity-related barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data .....	53
7.2.1. Capacity barriers at the level of data collection – the fieldworker .....	53
7.2.2. Capacity barriers at the level of data collation, analysis and reporting – M+E staff .....	53
7.3. The repetitive nature of attendance data as a compounding factor .....	55
7.4. Pen-and-paper systems can be improved upon using electronic data collection.....	55
7.5. A lack of financial capacity to facilitate good quality attendance tracking .....	59
7.6. Accountability as a motivation to report data selectively or inaccurately.....	62
7.7. (a lack of) Understanding of attendance data as a barrier to its effective utilisation.....	67

7.8. Acknowledgement of limitations and avenues for further research .....	68
7.9. Practical recommendations.....	70
8. <i>Conclusion</i> .....	72
9. <i>Bibliography</i> .....	75
<i>Appendix 1: The Evaluation Ladder</i> .....	81
<i>Appendix 2: Example of Informed Consent form for Interviewees</i> .....	82
<i>I hereby agree / disagree (circle the applicable option) to the audio recording of my interview for this study. ....</i>	<i>82</i>
<i>Appendix 3: UCT Human Participant Checklist</i> .....	<i>83</i>

# 1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis investigates the barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data by youth development NPOs (Non-profit Organisations) in Cape Town. In late 2019 I was hired by Waves for Change (W4C), a Cape Town-based NGO which provides mental health services, to help them build a piece of software to effectively track and report on the amount of a given intervention that they provide, expressed as attendance data. At the time, W4C had recently received a number of high profile awards, and had been publicly endorsed and visited by the British Royal Family. As a result, the organisation had an influx of funding, and had been seeking to provide their work with an academic evidence base. Due to the increase in visibility and funding, the organisation had the motivation and the resources to build a technical solution to effectively track and report on attendance data, which they viewed as the “first rung on the evaluation ladder” (see Appendix 1).

The proper collection and utilisation of data relating to attendance can be hugely beneficial to the interlinked processes of monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment in NPOs that provide not only non-medical health interventions, but also educational interventions and youth development interventions, among others. Understanding the ‘amount’ of an intervention provided is crucial if the intervention is to be replicated or scaled-up, or if the existing intervention is to be provided with appropriate resources. In this sense, accurate and usable attendance data is a vital part of the processes of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and impact assessment (Rowbotham et al 2019). It is this data that will be the focus of the following research.

O’Flynn (2010:2-3) provides a foundational understanding of the processes of M&E and impact assessment. She argues that development plans set in place to guide NPO activity “follow a logic which starts from the expression of a development goal; then into outcomes (or results) and outputs (and activities).” Monitoring is the process related to the work that goes into a programme (the outputs), evaluation relates to the results of this work (outcomes) and impact assessment relates to the “changes in peoples’ lives that relate to these results.” Attendance data interacts with these processes primarily

through its position as a core element of implementation fidelity (Dusenbury et al 2003:240). Implementation fidelity describes how closely the implementation of an intervention follows the design of that intervention. As argued by Carroll et al (2007:1), "It is only by making an appropriate evaluation of the fidelity with which an intervention has been implemented that a viable assessment can be made of its contribution to outcomes (...) Unless such an evaluation is made, it cannot be determined whether a lack of impact is due to poor implementation or inadequacies inherent in the programme itself." As pointed out by Yeaton and Sechrest (1981, in Dusenbury et al 2003:239): "when we understand that an intervention was not implemented with fidelity, data suggesting that it failed to have an effect become totally uninteresting." To relate this specifically to attendance data, if an implementation design specified that a participant should attend one two-hour session per week for 10 weeks, but the participant's attendance at that programme is not properly tracked, it becomes impossible to assess the impact of the programme on the beneficiary. A lack of good quality attendance data has an impact upon research attempting to assess the efficacy and impact of an intervention, but, as argued by Carroll et al (2007:2), the implications can carry to secondary research: "the common lack of data on implementation fidelity provided by primary research studies, known as "thinness", prevents those working on systematic reviews and meta-analyses from gauging possible heterogeneity between studies". When I asked the CEO of a prominent sport-for-development (S4D) NGO to point me in the direction of an evidence base for S4D's impact, he replied simply that "There is no evidence for the impact of sport-for-development as a whole. Nobody's collecting data."

Corbin & Strauss (2015:54) argue that "professional experience frequently leads to the judgement that some feature of the profession or its practice is less than effective (...) So it is believed that a good research study might help to correct that situation." Through my experience working with youth development NPOs in Cape Town, it has become clear that the use of attendance data is "less than effective." It is therefore this thesis' intention to begin to develop an understanding of this phenomenon, and to contribute to "correcting the situation." The focus of the research will be on the



barriers to attendance data reporting and utilisation in M&E processes at various levels of NPO administration and practice, from fieldworkers to M&E staff, to broader funding relationships.

Following this introduction, this thesis will outline a brief review of factors found in the literature which are potentially related to inadequate utilisation of attendance data (I have found no available literature which directly addresses this challenge), followed by a formal statement of the central research question. It will outline the conceptual underpinnings of the research question, and will then describe the methodology using which the research will be conducted, including data collection and data analysis. It will then outline the ethical considerations of the research and provide a timeline. Following these, the findings of the thesis will be outlined according to the broad themes identified during data analysis. A discussion will then be undertaken to outline the relevance of the thesis' findings in relation to relevant literature, including any literature which corroborates or disputes the main findings. Lastly, a discussion of methodological limitations and avenues for further research will be outlined.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic literature which directly relates to barriers to effective utilisation of attendance data by NPOs is scant. Having consulted the UCT humanities librarian, searched the UCT library, Google Scholar and JSTOR, and through wider searching using Google's search engine, I have been unable to find any literature which makes specific reference to this issue in a South African context. Therefore, this brief review will explore the literature surrounding potentially related aspects of NPO organisational functioning, mostly addressing barriers to effective M&E and impact assessment more broadly. These include capacity issues and issues inherent within the NPO-funder relationship in the current landscape, both of which may represent barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data.

The first major category of literature which could provide insight into the topic of this thesis relates to the over-stretched capacity of NPOs. Mueller-Hirth (2012:667) argues that increasingly, "NPOs are expected to be efficient financial managers in addition to, or perhaps as opposed to, being efficient at what they do as their 'core business'. Calculative practices such as M&E require specific skills and capacities which produce an ideal-typical model of post-apartheid NPO that is streamlined, flexible and responsible and able to research, count and audit correctly." This quote highlights the complexity of M&E practices specifically, whilst also highlighting the broader issue of high expectations of NPO capacity on the part of funders. This capacity gap can be felt particularly severely where processes of M&E and impact assessment are concerned. Ravallion (2008:5) highlights the difficulty NPOs face when attempting to design and perform rigorous evaluations of their work. He argues that "practical and logistical difficulties abound in designing and implementing sound evaluations. Special-purpose data collection and close supervision are typically required. The analytic and computational demands for valid inferences can also be daunting and require specialized skills."

It is well known that, particularly in South Africa there is a large number of NPOs, and competition for funding is fierce. Funding is not only scarce, but a donor focus on project funding (restricted to certain "flashy" activities, generally related directly to programme beneficiaries) over core funding

(unrestricted, and generally used to cover core costs such as M&E and admin staff) forces NPOs to divert “time, effort and resources from proper mission-driven, programmatic delivery, to searching for alternative ways to cover imperative core costs” (Ortiz 2001:6). Add to this the fact that many organisations exist within the “non-profit starvation cycle” where NPOs are unable to direct their limited funding towards decent organisational infrastructure (Goggins Gregory & Howard 2009), and it is clear that a lack of capacity, both financial and human, presents issues throughout the organisational structures and cultures of NPOs. As argues Ravallion (2008:5), where evaluations are concerned, “Short-cut methods promise quick results at low cost.” This can lead to a process whereby (ibid) “rigorous evaluations are driven out by non-rigorous ones.” Goggins Gregory & Howard (2009) attribute this lack of capacity directly to the decisions and actions of funding bodies. They contend that the unrealistic expectations of funders is a contributing factor to poorly informed and unsystematic evaluation. Funders, they argue, allot an excessively large proportion of their funding to programme-related expenses (to use the analogy of Waves for Change, this is wetsuits and surfboards for the beneficiaries, fieldworker pay, transport) and not enough to overheads (including, crucially, monitoring and evaluation expenses).

More potential barriers to effective utilisation of attendance data exist in the NPO-funder (or researcher) relationship than just the aforementioned issues around resource allocation. For example, Ravallion (2008:3) highlights tension that exists between practitioners and researchers as concerns the role of advocacy. He states that practitioners often want to advocate for their programme, whereas a researcher is interested in demonstrating causality between any improvements in the lives of beneficiaries, and the intervention (including appropriate/necessary attendance of the intervention. “As they [practitioners] strive to improve peoples’ lives”, which perspective can be in conflict with that of researchers or funders, “who are more inclined to critically question the foundations of any policy position.” This broader tension could impact the utilisation of attendance data at the level of reporting (as opposed to collection or processing), if that data is not conducive to the overall demonstration of impact, from the perspective of practitioners.

The tension between funder and practitioner does not only exist in the context of evaluation, with an implicit dichotomy between advocacy and rigour, but also in a broader sense. The relationships of power which exist between funders and practitioners also impact M&E, particularly with regards to quantitative data, such as attendance. Stirrat and Henkel (1997:72, in Reith 2010:448) argue that a partnership is immediately unbalanced where the 'act of receiving is hedged with conditionality at best, while at worst the gift may become a form of patronage and a means of control'. Mueller-Hirth (2012:657) describes an interviewee's reaction to quantitative M&E reporting: "If we can't give the numbers, we don't get the money." She (ibid) argues that "the perception of M&E as a 'tick-box exercise' and as a mechanism for uniformity conveyed a self-portrayal of NGOs as weak, with no agency and little power in hierarchical reporting structures." Mueller-Hirth (ibid:565) highlights that M&E processes were portrayed by NGO practitioners as a 'necessary evil', 'burdensome' and 'rigid', and that they viewed many M&E requirements as merely tracking compliance as opposed to impact. This is in stark contrast to the literature on the values of M&E and impact assessment, as well as the more targeted literature on the importance of attendance data as part of implementation fidelity. This literature (Carroll et al 2007; Moore et al 2006; Rowbotham et al 2019; Yeaton and Sechrest 1981; O'Flynn 2010) highlights the importance of well-conducted programme evaluations and impact assessments, with implementation fidelity, and therefore attendance by extension, seen as crucial to these processes.

### 3. CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

In order to guide the process of this study, to inform the types of data collected, and to inform how those data are analysed, it is vital to define a central research question. This process will be specified further with a number of sub-questions. Further, it is important to discuss the conceptual underpinnings of key terms within the central research question, particularly the term 'NPO'. This term is conceptually tricky and often loosely defined, and as such will be broken down further for the purposes of this research.

#### 3.1. CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION

Whilst the importance and potential utility of good quality attendance data is uncontroversial in the literature (Mueller & Hirth 2012; Moore et al 2006; Rowbotham et al 2019; Dane 1998; Carroll et al 2007), there is a lack of available literature interrogating issues surrounding its use in NPOs in under-resourced contexts, such as those experienced by NPOs in Cape Town, and experienced even more acutely elsewhere in South Africa and across the continent. As a result, this research has sought to address the following question:

*“What are the barriers to youth development/health promotion NPOs effectively utilising attendance data in their monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment?”*

Given the above question, the following sub-questions were explored

1. *“Do barriers relating to human and financial capacity impact the usage of attendance data?”*
2. *“Do barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data exist at the level of data collection (fieldworkers)?”*
3. *“Do barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data exist at the level of data collation, analysis and reporting (M+E departments)?”*
4. *“Does NPO positionality in relation to their target community, or in relation to funders, impact understandings of, and perspectives on, M+E and attendance data?”*

### 3.2. DEFINING 'NPO' FROM A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

'NPO' is a broad concept, which can describe a wide variety of organisations. Choto et al (2020:590) provide useful definitions by characterising NPOs on organisational and functional lines. From the organisational perspective, they claim that "an NPO is described as a trust, company or organisation established for a public purpose and the income received is not distributed to members or employees of the organisation". From a functional perspective, NPOs "are established with the main purpose of organising and overseeing voluntary social action directed at humanitarian problem-solving."

Particularly in the South African context, where inequality levels are among the worst in the world (World Bank 2021), NPOs and their staff may have vastly different socio-economic positionalities. Positionality, argue Martin and Van Gunten (2002:46) "is a concept that acknowledges that we are all raced, classed, and gendered and that these identities are relational, complex, and fluid positions rather than essential qualities." The positionalities of organisations and their staff (necessarily in relation to other individuals and groups in society) are likely to inform their responses to questions asked during research, and their perspectives on the usage of attendance data. Omotoso and Koch (2018:10) found that in South Africa, "a number of social factors, including education, employment status, provincial and racial differences" help to explain disparities in health outcomes, and as a result, health promotion NPOs operate mainly in under-resourced communities, whose populations face more health issues due to the rampant socio-economic health inequality in the country. For the purposes of examining NPO positionality for this study, it will be useful to distinguish between two types of NPOs in South Africa. The first is the Non-Governmental Organisation, or NGO. Martens (2002) wrestles with the complex task of defining an NGO, but arrives at a suitable definition. An NGO is a "formal (professionalized) independent societal organizations whose primary aim is to promote common goals [health promotion, in the case of this study] at the national or the international level." The second is a Community-Based Organisation, which Adebayo et al (2017:475) define as "a public or private non-profit organisation that

represents a community or a specific part of a larger community, and targets meeting a specific need in that community”.

An overly-simplistic reading would render CBOs a subset of NGOs, but important positionality differences mean that constructed meanings of certain concepts vital to this research could be markedly different across the types of organisations. The following observations are drawn not from the literature, but from my experience as an M+E consultant working in Cape Town. Firstly, CBOs are, necessarily, managed and staffed by people who live in, or are from, the target communities, which are more often majority black or coloured, and almost always less-resourced. NGOs on the other hand, are far more frequently run by, and staffed by (at least at middle- to upper-management levels) people who are white, more affluent, and not living in - or coming from - target communities. Staff at CBOs tend to be more inclined to think in terms of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), which is described by Mathie and Cunningham (2002) as an *approach* to development, a set of *methods* for community mobilisation, and as a *strategy* for community-based development. It rests on “the principle that the recognition of strengths [...] and assets of individuals and communities is more likely to inspire positive action for change than an exclusive focus on needs and problems.” On the other hand, NGO management, who are less likely to live in, or be from, their target communities, tend to employ a more “needs-based” approach to development objectives, whereby a problem (or need) is identified, then a solution is formulated and implemented.

In my experience in the sector, the positionality of CBOs, particularly in relation to their target communities, can impact a variety of internal and external processes, including M+E and impact assessment. The distinction between asset-based and needs-based community development is far from semantic; an organisation’s position on this spectrum, arguably influenced by their positionality, can completely alter its experience of organisation-funder relationships, a factor that the literature suggests is salient in examining an organisation’s M+E processes. It is therefore crucial that at every stage, from

conceptualisation, through sampling and data collection, to data analysis, the socio-economic, gendered and racial positionality of the cases chosen for research is considered.

As such, I attempted to remain mindful of the likelihood of the impact of positionality during data collection, and the design of my interview schedule. As outlined above, respondents' (at an individual, and therefore also organisational level) perspectives on M+E processes could be influenced by their positionality. Early during each interview, I made sure to ask certain questions to prompt respondents to give me a sense of their socio-economic positionality and allegiances to groups within society. Self-assessment of positionality is tricky, and as such had to be explored subtly and with adequate care taken not to offend or distract respondents.



## 4. METHODOLOGY

This thesis explores the research question using a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research methods, as argued by Garcia and Gluesing (2013:425) “are best suited to examine unique characteristics of particular groups, and emphasize contexts and constant shifts and dynamics in those contexts, gathering information about tacit cultural systems.” This is pertinent in the context of this research question, as barriers to organisational change are necessarily impacted by the perspectives of individuals operating within not only their own organisation, but a wider ecosystem of beneficiaries, funders (private and public), researchers and practitioners. Garcia and Gluesing (ibid) also highlight that qualitative research methods can address multiple levels of analysis, another feature well-suited to research into internal and external data collection and reporting cultures in NPOs. It is worth noting that whilst qualitative research methods “fit” well with the central research question, they also allow a closer alignment to my own philosophical position, which rests on the epistemological assumption that meaning does not reside solely in the world, but that the features of the world are given meaning through perspective – an interpretivist approach to research.

This research was conducted using a case study approach. This approach is well suited to my central research question for a number of reasons. Yin (2018:50) describes a case study as “an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident.” He further grounds the importance of case study research in context when he states (ibid) “you would want to do a case study because you want to understand a real-world case and assume that such an understanding is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to your case.” This is certainly true of researching cultures surrounding M&E and impact assessment in NPOs, and to understanding the behaviours, perspectives, and structures which present barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data specifically. Yin (2018:47) provides a short set of guidelines which may help a researcher identify when case study research has an advantage over other methods. He argues

that when a “why” question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the researcher has little or no control then case study research offers a good fit.

This research used an embedded approach to case study design. M&E and impact assessment data flows through every level of NPO operation, from data collection usually conducted by fieldworkers, to data collation, analysis and reporting usually conducted by M&E or “desk” staff, to data being required by funders, researchers or other external or internal stakeholders. As a result, this study gathered data through observation and interview at two main levels of NPO operation: fieldworker and M&E officer (or equivalent). DePoy (2016:176) asks us to consider the question: “Does the unit of analysis [the NPO in this case] have natural parts [distinct internal elements] that will reveal relevant information? If ‘yes’, then an embedded approach would be used.” As far as internal processes are concerned, an embedded study can reveal more information than a holistic one.

One criticism frequently levelled against case study research is the lack of generalisability. This concern is assuaged by Punch (1998:154) who argues that case study research can produce theory or concepts which are more broadly applicable than to only the case under investigation. He argues that whilst the production or discovery of concepts or propositions does not necessarily prove generalisability, it can provide avenues for testing in further research. This echoes, in some way, the methodological approaches of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 2015), which seeks to draw concepts out of in-depth study.

#### 4.1. SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

Miles and Huberman (2014:46) state that “Qualitative researchers usually work with *small* samples of people, nested in their context and studied in-depth.” This research was no exception and employed a case study design. It focussed on a small number of organisations operating in similar fields in Cape Town, and aimed to explore each case in-depth, and “nested in their context.” Punch (1998:150), echoes the utility of small sample sizes in case study research, stating that case study research seeks to understand the machinations of a case (in this research, an organisation) “in depth, and in its natural

setting, recognising its complexity and its context.” Per Yin (2018), case studies can involve one case (single case design) or multiple cases (multiple case design). The object under study, namely the barriers to effective utilisation of attendance data, occurs across a wide variety of NPOs, and possibly for a variety of reasons. As a result, this study sought to engage with a small number of “cases”, or organisations, around Cape Town, making it a multiple-case design. As per this thesis’ conceptualisation of Cape Town NPOs from a sociological perspective, this study engaged with two NPOs each from both middle-class backgrounds and working-class backgrounds. This could also be broken along the lines of the NGO/CBO dichotomy raised in the previous section. Engaging with NPOs from each broad grouping of positionalities (‘local’/community-based vs ‘non-local’) contributed to a representative sample of each group, and enabled me to better recognise the impacts that organisations’ and individuals’ socio-economic positionalities have on their perspectives of M+E and organisation-funder relationships.

After considering potential barriers such as capacity constraints, differing subjective meanings of “monitoring”, “evaluation” and “impact assessment”, and tensions within the NPO-funder relationship, this research sampled a small number of organisations in order to both, per Yin (2018:46), “predict similar results” and “produce contrasting results but for predictable reasons.” Whilst organisations could not be selected based upon their staff members’ subjective understandings of M&E or their perceptions of NPO-funder relationships before research commenced, certain factors, such as capacity and funding, were considered in sampling. As a result, this research’s sampling focussed on four cases (organisations) with differing levels of funding and capacity, as this could be determined easily and accurately at the outset of research. It is worth noting also that this research was not focussed upon “the unusual or rare case, or the critical case” (Yin 2018:45), so it would not have fit well to apply the restraints of a single case design.

Observations, according to Corbin and Strauss (2015:60) are especially important for two reasons. Firstly, “it is not unusual for persons to say they are doing one thing, but in reality they are doing something else. The only way to know this is through observation.” Secondly, “persons are not always

aware of, or able to articulate, the subtleties of what goes on during interactions between themselves and others.” These two benefits of data collection by observation are certainly pertinent in the context of this research, particularly the improved ability of the researcher to gain a “third party” perspective on interactions between individuals in an organisational context. For the purposes of participant observation, recordings were made where possible, as well as extensive field notes. Whilst observations are useful for the above reasons, they also have potential limitations. Besides being time-consuming, a researcher may assign meaning to an observed interaction without interrogating this meaning in collaboration with participants. Awareness of this problem can greatly assuage its negative effects, and was especially important in the context of this research, due to my high level of sensitivity to the topic.

Interviews can take multiple forms in qualitative data collection, ranging from unstructured to structured, with the broad “semi-structured” format sitting between the two. This research will make use of semi-structured interviews, which Corbin and Strauss (2015:59) argue “enable researchers to maintain some consistency over the concepts that are covered in each interview.” It is important to note that whilst semi-structured interviews have the advantage of being more time-efficient and focussed than unstructured interviews, they “take away control of the interview process from participants” (ibid). It was therefore necessary to ensure that participants feel able to steer the interview in any direction they feel may be relevant, unincumbered by what they think I, as researcher, may be looking for (or not looking for). Instruments such as recording transcripts and field notes will be used to record and analyse data from interviews, as well as theoretical memoing throughout. Interviews will have to begin with establishing a baseline; does this organisation collect attendance data? Depending on whether the organisation captures and uses this data will inform the direction of the remainder of the interview. Examples of themes (and corresponding questions) that I covered in interviews are as follows:

Theme	Example question(s)
Capacity constraints (data collection)	<i>Asking fieldworker:</i> How do you record the attendance at sessions you run? Do you have adequate time to accurately record attendance at your sessions?
Capacity constraints (data management)	<i>Asking M&amp;E staff:</i> Do you use any tools to help you manage attendance data? Do you have time to collate and manipulate attendance data as part of your daily work?
Lack of understanding of utility of attendance data	<i>Asking all staff:</i> What is the importance of recording the attendance of participants at your programme?
Scepticism about funder requirements	<i>Asking M&amp;E staff:</i> Why do funders want the attendance data of participants in the programme?

**Table 1 – sample questions relating to pertinent themes**

#### 4.2. ANALYSIS OF DATA

This thesis will follow the Miles and Huberman (1994) framework for the analysis of qualitative data. Their approach to analysis has three main components, as outlined by Punch (1998:203): Firstly, data reduction and data display, and then the drawing and verifying of conclusions, which they describe as “the reason for reducing and displaying data.” He outlines the concurrent nature of this step with previous steps, warning that “possible conclusions may be noted early in the analysis, but they may be vague and ill-formed at this stage.”

Data reduction occurs continuously and is “not separate from analysis” (Punch 1998:203). Data reduction involves the crucial activity of coding. The coding of qualitative data, particularly when case study research is concerned, can be complicated and time consuming. In order to maintain rigour throughout these processes, it was useful to follow the coding procedure laid out by De Wet and Erasmus (2005), which begins with a “close reading of the data”. They argue (ibid:29) that a close reading of generated data, which is ‘drawn from Grounded Theory’, allows the researcher to gain a

high-level overview and an initial impression of issues arising in the data. It allows the researcher to inculcate fragments of data into a broader context in a relatively 'unmediated' manner (ibid.) Next comes the process of first-level coding. According to Saldaña (2013:3), a code in qualitative inquiry "is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data." Therefore, coding is in and of itself analytical, and "not simply mechanical" (De Wet and Erasmus 2005:30). After this I engaged in finer first-level coding, as well as second-level coding. De Wet and Erasmus (Ibid:33) describe two steps in the process of second-level coding: identifying clusters and hierarchies of information, and a deeper level of analysis during which patterns and relationships in the data are identified. They describe (ibid.) "arranging a number of broad first-level codes into thematic clusters." Simultaneous data reduction by refining first-level codes will ensure that the data used remains relevant and manageable. Data display, as outlined by Punch (1998:203-204) also takes place continually and is partly represented by the coding process. Quirkos, a qualitative data analysis software which provides a graphical interface to display codes and themes, was used for the purposes of analysis. I found this helpful due to the visual nature of the software, and the lack of excess features.

Punch (1998:204) also highlights the importance of memoing to the qualitative researcher. He states that "While coding is being done, at whatever level, all sorts of ideas occur to the analysis. These become the stuff of memos." It has been important to bear in mind during this research that memos should have *conceptual content* and should not simply seek to describe the data. In this sense, argues Punch (ibid:207), memos "help the analyst move from the empirical to the conceptual level" and they "link coding with the developing of propositions." In the context of this research, this was particularly important, as I was not testing existing theory, but attempting to contribute to the development of new theory.

Verification of findings is crucial to good quality, rigorous qualitative research. Morse et al (2002:17) describe verification as "the mechanisms used during the process of research to incrementally

contribute to ensuring reliability and validity and, thus, the rigor of a study.” Because this research was testing clearly pre-defined theories, borrowing from grounded theory, particularly the constant comparative method, has been useful to maintain internal validity. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1984:126), the researcher using the constant comparative method “simultaneously codes and analyses data in order to develop concepts; by continually comparing specific incidents in the data, the researcher refines these concepts, identifies their properties, explores their relationships to one another, and integrates them into a coherent explanatory model.” Comparison is the key component and analytical tool in qualitative research, argues Tesch (1990:96). She explains that: “The method of comparing and contrasting is used for practically all intellectual tasks during analysis: forming categories, establishing the boundaries of the categories, assigning the segments to categories, summarizing the content of each category, finding negative evidence, etc. The goal is to discern conceptual similarities, to refine the discriminative power of categories, and to discover patterns.”

## 5. ETHICS

This research was guided by the UCT Research Ethics Code for research involving human participants and was completed under supervision. All data gathered was treated in a way that ensures the anonymity of the individuals and organisations involved. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and has been appropriately documented. Any recordings of interviews or observations were only be obtained with permission (See Appendix 2 for an example).

Due to the status of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of research, three out of eight interviews were conducted online. For those cases where in-person observation and interviews took place, appropriate COVID protocols were followed at all times, including wearing a mask, practicing social distancing, and ensuring that myself and the participants of the study were not experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 at the time of data collection. The UCT COVID-19 checklist was referred to at each stage (see Appendix 3).



## 6. FINDINGS

### 6.1. INTRODUCTION

During data analysis, three main themes were identified. These themes can be broadly described as relating to (1) capacity, (2) understanding and (3) motivation. Capacity describes an individual or organisation's access to resources, human or technical, to facilitate the effective collection, collation and usage of attendance data. Understanding describes an individual or organisation's understanding of the various types of attendance data, as well as their use cases. Motivation, in many cases closely linked to understanding, describes the processes, structures and relationships through which organisations, and individuals within them, are compelled or encouraged to collect and utilise attendance data, *or* the processes, structures and relationships which represent barriers to the collection and utilisation of good quality attendance data.

This findings chapter will report results relating to each theme, broken down to address the perspectives of fieldworkers and M+E staff within each identified theme, per the sub-questions to this thesis' central research question (*"What are the barriers to youth development/health promotion NPOs effectively utilising attendance data in their monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment?"*), which are as follows:

1. *"Do barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data exist at the level of data collection (fieldworkers)?"*
2. *"Do barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data exist at the level of data collation, analysis and reporting (M+E departments)?"*
3. *"Does NPO positionality in relation to their target community, or in relation to funders, impact understandings of, and perspectives on, M+E and attendance data?"*
4. *"Do barriers relating to human and financial capacity impact the usage of attendance data?"*

The last sub-question here – “Do barriers relating to human and financial capacity impact the usage of attendance data?” – will be explored through the lens of questions 1 and 2 above, as capacity developed into a broader theme during data analysis. Question 3, relating to NPO positionality in relation to funders and beneficiaries, will inform analysis of themes throughout, but closer attention will be paid to the positionality not only of organisations, but individuals within organisations. The significance of this dimension is due to the relative socio-economic homogeneity amongst staff at CBOs (between office staff and field workers), and the relative socio-economic heterogeneity of these groups at larger, better funded NGOs. In the former, the relationships between all staff and beneficiaries are generally founded in community, whereas in NGOs, upper- and middle-management staff often live starkly different socio-economic realities from beneficiaries, whereas fieldworkers are more commonly part of target communities.

The findings in response to the above questions will be organised as follows:

1. Capacity barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data
  - a. Capacity barriers at the level of the fieldworker
  - b. Capacity barriers at the level of M+E staff
2. Barriers to the effective utilisation relating to (a lack of, or varying) understandings of attendance data
  - a. Understanding barriers at the level of the fieldworker
  - b. Understanding barriers at the level of M+E staff
3. Barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data relating to pressures motivating its collection, collation and reporting

Members of staff from four organisations were interviewed, and participants were observed for a working day at two organisations (Organisation 1 and 2). Participant organisations utilised attendance data to varying degrees and collected and managed their data using a variety of methods. The organisations are outlined below (Fig. 1), with a brief insight into their processes and the kinds of

attendance data that are accessible as a result of their processes (absolute, intensity, duration, breadth). Distinctions are also made between M+E staff who had received formal or informal M+E training, and those who had never received M+E training.

Organisation	Staff	(In)formal M+E training?	Attendance digitised?	Types of attendance data utilised
Organisation 1	M+E Staff 1 Fieldworker 1	Yes	Yes (manual, from paper registers)	Absolute (reach), intensity/duration (dosage)
Organisation 2	M+E Staff 2 Fieldworker 2 Fieldworker 3	Yes	Yes (automatic app)	Absolute (reach), intensity/duration (dosage), breadth
Organisation 3	M+E Staff 4 Fieldworker 4	No	No	Absolute (reach)
Organisation 4	M+E Staff 5 Fieldworker 5	No	No	Absolute (reach)

**Table. 1 – Matrix of organisations including respondents and attendance tracking basic overview**

## 6.2. CAPACITY BARRIERS

The first major theme identified in interviews related to capacity issues surrounding the collection, collation, digitisation and utilisation of attendance data. Capacity issues include human capacity (time and human resources available to an organisation to devote to the management of attendance data) and technical capacity (the availability of technical solutions to assuage human capacity shortfalls).

The sheer amount of data which makes up complete attendance datasets, at both individual and organisational levels, seemed to be the root of capacity concerns, and underlay each individual theme presented below.

Following the sub-questions of this thesis' central research question, this section will be broken down into (1), capacity barriers reported at the level of the fieldworker and, (2) capacity barriers reported at the level of M+E staff.

### *6.2.1. CAPACITY BARRIERS AT THE LEVEL OF THE FIELDWORKER*

Each fieldworker interviewed described experiencing capacity constraints which limited their ability to collect accurate attendance data 'in the field'. These capacity constraints were:

1. A lack of human capacity at sessions to engage in high-quality data collection
2. A lack of time at sessions to engage in high-quality data collection

Three out of five fieldworkers (Fieldworkers 1,4,5) reported that these capacity constraints were exacerbated by the method of data collection, which tended to be a pen-and-paper system. Two out of five fieldworkers (Fieldworkers 2,3), those who used an attendance tracking app, reported that these capacity issues still existed, but were mitigated by their organisation's chosen method of attendance tracking.

All fieldworkers (Fieldworkers 1-5) reported that the iterative, continuous nature of attendance data collection compounded existing barriers to the collection of the data.

#### **6.2.1.1. Human Capacity at the point of data collection as a barrier**

All fieldworker respondents (Fieldworker 1-5) reported that a lack of human capacity at the point of data collection had presented a barrier to effectively collecting attendance data. All respondents referred to the fact that attendance data needed to be collected at the beginning or end of a session, both of which were times requiring particular attention from staff:

*“I’m often running these sessions by myself, you know. So as soon as the kids get here on the transport, I need to give them my attention. That just means doing other tasks can be distracting.” (Fieldworker 4)*

Fieldworkers 2 and 3 reported that when running sessions with more members of staff present, human capacity barriers to attendance data collection were reduced, because one fieldworker could dedicate their attention to data collection:

*“There can be a few of us [coaches] at the sessions, which makes the whole thing [taking attendance] easier... Yeah, one of us can welcome the kids and write down their names, and the other coach can start the session straight away.” (Fieldworker 3)*

#### **6.2.1.2. Time limitations at the point of data collection as a barrier**

All fieldworker respondents (Fieldworker 1-5) reported that attendance tracking was time consuming, and that this presented barriers to effectively collecting accurate data each session. This concern was particularly pronounced among fieldworkers (Fieldworkers 1-3) who run shorter sessions, such as in the after-school space. The concern was still voiced, but was less pronounced for fieldworkers (Fieldworkers 4,5) who ran longer sessions, such as creches or day-care centres:

*“It is a bit annoying, because now you’ve got 40 names to write down. You know what I mean? So I think that that makes it a bit annoying, and also takes away time from the session. They [the kids] don’t want to stop. So, if you have a 30 minute session and 15 minutes was doing the register, you’ve lost 15 minutes of your time. And now you only have 15 minutes left, what can you do in 15 minutes?” (Fieldworker 1)*

#### **6.2.1.3. Methods of data collection exacerbating capacity constraints: Efficiency**

Fieldworkers from organisations 1 and 4 (Fieldworkers 1,4) reported that being required to write down each participant’s name on a list each session was inefficient and time consuming:

*“At the moment, we mostly write the names down on a sheet, or we send them to [M+E Officer] on WhatsApp. It’s a mission, it’s easier when we have the lists and just tick the kids that are there” (Fieldworker 1)*

Fieldworkers 2 and 3 reported that using a pre-loaded list of participants on an attendance tracking mobile app reduced the time barriers to effectively collecting attendance data:

*“Using the app is easiest, we only have to write down the names of kids who aren’t on the list. So it can take a long time at the start of the year, but yeah, as the kids are more consistent it’s easier. It’s like when we used the register list, the app is the same. Ticking is much quicker than writing the whole name!” (Fieldworker 3)*

#### **6.2.1.4. Methods of data collection exacerbating capacity constraints: Accuracy**

Some fieldworkers (Fieldworkers 1,4,5) reported that their pen-and-paper systems of data collection led to data being shared and reported with inaccuracies. One way in which paper-based systems were reported to lead to data inaccuracy was the prevalence of data loss.

*“Well we’re running our sessions in Cape Town! You know how windy it is here. Sometimes, yes, the registers would blow away off the field, and so we would just try to remember which of the kids were at the session when [M+E Officer] asks us later, but you know it’s not easy to remember each session.” (Fieldworker 5)*

Fieldworkers (Fieldworkers 4,5) also reported that when rushing to write down the names of participants, or tick names on a written list, data accuracy issues arose.

*“It’s quite often that [M+E Officer] will WhatsApp us like ‘which participant was ticked on the list from Wednesday’s session, for example’, because we ticked across two boxes, or he can’t read the name of the kid we wrote down at the end who wasn’t on the list. That’s just when you have to rush to get the lists done, those errors can obviously creep in.” (Fieldworker 4)*

#### 6.2.1.5. The repetitive nature of attendance data collection as a compounding factor

Four out of five fieldworkers (Fieldworkers 1,2,3,5) reported that the repetitive nature of attendance data collection acted as a compounding factor to the capacity concerns they already experienced. One fieldworker stated:

*“...and you have to do it every time. So it’s not just 10 minutes and that’s that, it’s 10 minutes each session, which means they [the participants] get bored, and I also get bored! I’m a coach, and I want to coach.”* (Fieldworker 1)

The same fieldworker contrasted this with other data types, such as pre-programme and post-programme tests:

*“It’s not like a pre-test, or getting the kids’ details for the start of the programme ... like their indemnity forms and stuff, yeah ... we have to do it all the time.”* (Fieldworker 1)

#### 6.2.2. CAPACITY BARRIERS AT THE LEVEL OF M+E STAFF

As well as fieldworkers, all M+E staff interviewed reported that they experienced capacity constraints which impeded their ability to collect, collate and report on attendance data to a high quality. They cited various challenges:

1. The “centralisation” of attendance data under one member of staff (M+E 1,2)
2. The constant, repetitive nature of attendance data (M+E 1-4)
3. Challenges with data being shared between fieldworkers and M+E departments (M+E 1-4)
4. A lack of human capacity to digitise attendance data which had been collected manually (M+E 1,3,4)

The centralisation and repetitive nature of attendance data in organisations interviewed had the reported impact of compounding human and technical capacity constraints, causing M+E officers to regard attendance data as a particularly difficult and strenuous data point to collect and manage.

#### **6.2.2.1. The centralisation of attendance data under one member of staff**

Two M+E staff (M+E 1,2) described attendance data in their organisation as being excessively centralised under one member of staff. This centralisation presented barriers to the effective utilisation of the data because data management processes and resources were only known to one member of staff, meaning that (1) that member of staff was overburdened during particularly strenuous points in the reporting cycle and (2), if that member of staff was unavailable (due to sickness, other commitments), attendance data could not be utilised or managed effectively. When asked who dealt with attendance data at their organisation, one M+E officer responded:

*“So it’s all me... That’s definitely a problem with the way we track attendance, that it all comes down to me. Obviously that makes sense with me being the data lead, but [other M+E officer] doesn’t know how to navigate the spreadsheets I use, so if I’m not around it makes it really tricky for [organisation] to collate and report on that [attendance data] ... And then obviously when we have reports due, like for [funder] recently, it gets really hectic because I’m the only one able to extract what they need.” (M+E2)*

#### **6.2.2.2. The repetitive nature of attendance data**

As with fieldworkers, all M+E office staff (M+E 1-4) reported that attendance data presented a unique challenge due to the amount of data which makes up a complete dataset, and the regularity with which it needs to be collected and managed:



*“Well obviously the amount of data is absolutely massive (laughs). That’s the first thing about attendance data if you’re going to collect it well is that it just keeps coming and coming.” (M+E 1)*

This challenge was also reported by a member of M+E staff at an organisation which used a digital attendance tracking platform. Their M+E officer expressed that whilst the use of a digital attendance tracking platform helped gather data, the sheer amount and regularity of data input made management of data difficult:

*“Even with the app it’s still hard to make sure it’s all correct, you know? Obviously there’s more oversight than before, but that means we feel like we should be doing more with the data, and it’s absolutely constant.” (M+E 2)*

### **6.2.2.3. Issues surrounding the sharing of attendance data between fieldworkers and office staff**

Some M+E staff (M+E 1,2) reported that attendance data, once collected, could be lost before reaching the organisations’ central offices. The loss of individual data sets contributed to organisations’ decreased ability to accurately record and report on attendance intensity and duration for those concerned participants and sites. One M+E officer working at a sport for development NGO in Cape Town stated that:

*“We’ve had issues with the way data gets from site to the support hub [central office] in the past, for sure. Obviously the coaches are operating on beaches, and it’s windy in Cape Town, so it’s always been an issue of papers getting lost, blown away or just lost in transit.” (M+E 2)*

This concern was corroborated by fieldworkers. One fieldworker from the same organisation stated that:

*“With the registers, yeah, they sometimes can get lost (laughs). I’m sure [M+E officer] told you this, but it’s true, when you’ve got a pile of papers that need to go to the support hub, with the beach and then the transport, it’s quite easy to lose them sometimes” (Fieldworker 3)*

#### **6.2.2.4. Lack of human capacity to manually digitise attendance data**

At organisations where attendance data was collected manually, M+E staff (M+E 3,4) reported human capacity issues relating to the digitisation of data. At one organisation, they did not digitise attendance data at all due to the capacity demands of the activity:

*“We get the registers in the Qubook [notebook that each fieldworker has on site], but then they don’t get put into the computer... Yeah, that would just take too long and we don’t have anyone who can do that.” (M+E 3)*

At one organisation where manually collected attendance data is digitised, the M+E officer reported that the process was very time consuming, taking up most of one staff member’s capacity. This staff member reported that if the organisation was to grow beyond its current size, their current method would not be workable:

*“We do digitise our attendance data, yeah. But it’s a whole job, like [data entry person] has to spend most of his time putting that data into excel. We’re definitely looking at ways to automate that process, because it takes him so long. And if we’re going to grow our sites, we definitely will have to think of something” (M+E 1)*

An M+E officer at an organisation which used a digital attendance tracking platform reported that the system had assuaged the capacity concerns brought about during the manual digitisation of attendance data. They reported that the reduced capacity burden had allowed them to make use of the data:

*“So before we used the app, it was a real mission. We did digitise the data, but it was really tricky to get it all correct I think, and to make sure it was in on time to do anything with it.”* (M+E 2)

#### **6.2.2.5. Lack of human capacity to manipulate and report on data**

During observation of one CBO (Organisation 3), it became clear that the M+E officer (M+E 3) at that organisation had very limited data management skills, and did not know how to use excel to meaningfully analyse and report on attendance data. Whilst the organisation was not using excel for the purposes of attendance data management, I was able to observe their M+E and reporting lead compiling financial information in Excel for the purposes of grant reporting. The M+E staff at this organisation were comfortable sorting and filtering a table of data, and could use basic formulae like “=SUM” (addition of a set of values) and “=AVERAGE” (calculating the mean of a set of values), but were unaware of more complex functionality like pivot tables, which are practically necessary when dealing with larger and more protracted datasets such as attendance.

This organisation was not digitising their attendance data, but a lack of understanding of Excel within the organisation would represent a significant barrier to the effective utilisation of that data if it were to become available to them in a digital format.

When asked how they analysed their attendance data, M+E staff from organisations that did not digitise their data (M+E 3,4) reported that analysis was difficult or impossible to do accurately due to the size of datasets and their unwieldy nature in a non-digital format:

*“Hm. It’s very difficult to analyse when you don’t have it [the attendance data] on a computer.”*  
(M+E 3)

*“We guess about a lot of our numbers. And we speak to the team leaders and fieldworkers about it, but we don’t know for sure what the numbers are precisely. We can definitely say roughly the reach, but it’s difficult to be precise.” (M+E 4)*

However, M+E officers at organisations where M+E data was being digitised (M+E 1,2) did not report any capacity issues when it came to understanding how to analyse that data in excel:

*“Once we had the data in Excel, it’s not super hard to work with. We can see the kids average attendance, attendance over time by session, our most attended groups, that kind of thing. It can take some time, but it’s pretty easy to do if you can use Excel” (M+E 2)*

#### **6.2.2.6. Lack of M+E capacity due to core versus programme funding patterns**

One M+E lead (M+E 2) highlighted the problems associated with funders’ insistence on providing programme funding rather than core funding. She argued that NPOs with stronger M+E systems (more resourced organisations) were able to leverage this strength to request core funding. She also claimed that other organisations with less “strong” M+E systems would struggle to exercise this leverage over funders, who would insist that funding was spent “directly” on participants (programme funding).

*“I think what makes it even more difficult is the stronger you can build your M&E, the more you can ask for funding just to fund M&E staff. We’ve got a couple of funders who fund 100% my salary, [data manager’s] salary, [safeguarding officer’s] salary, with no expectations that money must go to children. Whereas if you’re with organisations that don’t have that really established, that’s where you get where the office manager is also the M&E person, is also the finance lady, because the funder says “We’ll pay you one salary, all the other money we want to see directly go to participants.”*

### **6.3. UNDERSTANDING**

This section will first outline understandings of attendance data as reported by those engaged in data collection (fieldworkers) and then understandings as reported by members of staff engaged in collation, analysis and reporting (M+E departments). This section will explore (a lack of) understanding of attendance data as a barrier to its effective utilisation.

Understandings of the types of attendance data, whether described technically (absolute, intensity, duration, breadth) or more colloquially (“reach”, “attendance over time”), varied between organisations, and between individuals within organisations.

### *6.3.1. FIELDWORKER UNDERSTANDING OF ATTENDANCE DATA*

Understandings of attendance data among fieldworkers, relating both to the types of data and its use cases, was limited in most cases. This section will outline findings relating to (1) fieldworker understandings of types of attendance data and (2) fieldworker understandings of the use cases of attendance data.

#### **6.3.1.1. Fieldworker understanding of types of attendance data**

Most fieldworkers interviewed (Fieldworkers 1,2,3,5) reported a limited understanding of the types of attendance data available to an organisation. Across these fieldworkers, attendance was seen as a binary (also known as “absolute” attendance), and was limited to a session-by-session understanding of attendance. In other words, those fieldworkers tended to express an understanding of attendance data that is most directly comparable to a tick versus a cross in a single day’s attendance register. This is exemplified by a quote from one fieldworker:

*“Attendance is just attendance, no? (laughs). Like, the learner was either there or they weren’t there.” (Fieldworker 4)*

One fieldworker expressed a more complex understanding of different types of attendance data. This fieldworker explained the concept of “dosage” to me (intensity of attendance x duration of attendance). He explained:

*“If the child came once, like at the start of the programme, then we can’t really say they’ve attended the programme. But if we say the child came every week, or every month, then we can say that maybe that child has attended the programme.”* (Fieldworker 3).

### **6.3.1.2. Fieldworker understandings of use cases of attendance data**

Closely related to fieldworkers’ understandings of the variety of types of attendance data were their understandings of the uses of that data. Understandings of the use cases of attendance data were more varied than understandings of their varying types.

#### *6.3.1.2.1. Attendance data as a tool for funders to maintain oversight over spending*

The most commonly reported use case of attendance data by fieldworkers interviewed (Fieldworkers 1-5) was its use as a measure of accountability to the organisations’ funders. Crucially, these were not descriptions of attendance data’s utility in outcome attribution or impact assessment *for* funders, but specifically about funders having oversight over their spending. One fieldworker said:

*“I think definitely it’s most important for the funders. I think we need to, yeah, the data is important. I think, like I say, I don’t think there’s anyone who - maybe there is - I don’t think there’s anyone that’s just going to pump money into something and not see where it’s going.”*  
(Fieldworker 1)

Another fieldworker concurred, and emphasised the importance of attendance data for the purposes of funder accountability, stating:

*"I think another thing is, I think, I mean, if I had a lot of money and had to fund I think it's important that I know where my money is coming. It's easy for someone to say "here's 20 million." And then all you see the soccer field being built, but the kids have to be using that soccer field, you know? So that's where the [attendance] data comes in."* (Fieldworker 3)

#### 6.3.1.2.2. Attendance data as a tool for safeguarding

The second most commonly understood use case for attendance data reported by fieldworkers was as a data point which could contribute to good safeguarding practices. Fieldworkers 1,3,4 and 5 reported that attendance data could be used to ensure that children were safely accounted for at the programme.

*"And yes, for knowing when we had the kids and where they are ... Yeah, safeguarding, exactly. So if a parent calls us and their child hasn't come home from the creche, we can say "ah yes, he was there or he wasn't there."* (Fieldworker 4)

#### 6.3.1.2.3. Attendance data as a tool to help make programme decisions

Fieldworkers 1 and 2 reported an understanding that attendance data could help make decisions that improve the running of a programme. These included the allocation of financial and human resources, as well as scheduling decisions.

*"And also just in terms of how your coaching is going and where there's less sessions maybe near to the exams, or near to the end of the year so you can follow up on all of that. Where's it gone down? Where's it gone up? And then we as coaches can also see okay, this is maybe where we need to improve, "Ok we can't have netball, let's say netball and hockey on the same day." Because those two groups, the kids are not sure if I must be a netball or hockey, because that's on the same day."* (Fieldworker 1)

### 6.3.2. M+E STAFF UNDERSTANDING OF ATTENDANCE DATA

Across all organisations interviewed, understanding of types and use cases of attendance data was more comprehensive among M+E officers or departments than it was among fieldworkers. However, across the M+E structures of the various organisations interviewed, understandings of attendance data's types and use cases was markedly more varied. Better resourced organisations, particularly those organisations which were able to maintain dedicated M+E departments or officers, had better understandings as outlined in this section, broken down into (1) understanding of types of attendance data and (2) types of attendance data.

#### 6.3.2.1. M+E staff understanding of types of attendance data

In terms of understanding the various types of attendance data, members of M+E staff from less-resourced organisations displayed a more limited understanding. These members of staff were, in both cases, not dedicated M+E staff, but undertook a number of roles within the organisation. Furthermore, these members of staff stated during interview that they had not been formally or informally trained in M+E practice or theory. On the types of attendance data that they could encounter, one member of staff stated:

*“Well, we can say at the end of the year that we’ve reached maybe 900 learners. So when the director asks me what is our reach of learners this year, I tell him 900. So we’re measuring the total number of learners who attended [organisation name]’s programme that year.” (M+E 3)*

The respondent quoted above displayed a good understanding of absolute attendance at the level of the organisation and the individual, when compared with fieldworkers' reported understanding, which was limited to the individual: “That participant attended on that day”.

Members of M+E staff from better-resourced organisations, where those staff were each dedicated to M+E processes without other responsibilities within the organisation, displayed a more comprehensive



understanding of different types of attendance data. M+E staff from organisations 1 and 2 (M+E 1, 2) displayed a good understanding of absolute attendance, as well as intensity and duration. The M+E officer at Organisation 2 stated:

*“We to be honest at [Organisation], we we've started distinguishing between reach and meaningful engagement, because if our targets are 2000, we say we've reached them. And I've written in all our reports now that those children have come at least once. But for a child to be “meaningfully engaged”, we want them to attend at least half of the curriculum.” (M+E 2)*

### **6.3.2.2. M+E staff understanding of use cases of attendance data**

Much the same as with types of attendance data, M+E staff displayed a more wide-ranging understanding of its use cases than fieldworkers. Their demonstrated understandings of attendance data were also different from fieldworkers in that they tended to be more oriented towards the macro level within the organisation, as opposed to the micro, or individual level of each programme beneficiary.

#### *6.3.2.2.1. Attendance data as useful for making programme decisions*

All M+E officers interviewed (M+E 1-4) reported understanding that attendance data could be used to make programmatic decisions, such as the re-allocation of resources, the adjusting of curricula, or the movement of sites. The examples used by respondents to demonstrate this understanding were context specific, but a clear understanding was demonstrated across M+E staff from well-resourced and less-well resourced organisations. One M+E officer stated:

*“They're [funders] not always interested in this side of things. But we try to collect some of the data to try and see how we must change the programme. How we must change the coach training, how we must change what we do different with boys and girls, for example.” (M+E 2)*

#### *6.3.2.2.2. Attendance data as useful for child safeguarding*

All M+E staff interviewed (M+E 1-4) understood the utility of attendance data as a tool to promote good safeguarding practices. All respondents (M+E 1-4) highlighted an understanding that attendance data could be useful to retrospectively determine the whereabouts of a beneficiary in the event of a parental or police enquiry:

*“So one example [of a time attendance data might be used for child safeguarding] is if a child goes missing, and the parents or SAPS need to ask us “was x, y or z child with you on this day?”.*

(M+E 3)

Further to this, respondents from Organisation 2 (M+E 2) described using attendance data to track unusually infrequent participant attendance. In these cases, a member of staff would be able to carry out a home visit to ensure the wellbeing of the beneficiary:

*“We’re sometimes able to look at a participant’s attendance record, and then if we see that someone who usually attends all the time has suddenly dropped off, we can send a coach out to their home or call the parents or whatever to check that they’re ok.”* (M+E 2)

#### 6.3.2.2.3. Attendance data for impact assessment

M+E officers who had expressed an understanding of intensity and duration as types of attendance (M+E 1,2) reported that attendance data could be used for impact assessment. In this case, attendance data can be combined with test taken before and after a beneficiary receives a curriculum from an organisation, and the efficacy of the curriculum can be assessed. One M+E officer stated that:

*“And of course, without the data on how many times a kid has come, there’s only so much you can do in terms of explaining impact. That variable has to be more detailed than “Did they attend, yes or no?” We want rigour in our own impact assessment and that’s part of it.”* (M+E

2)

Another M+E officer (M+E 1) who had expressed an understanding of ‘dosage’ linked attendance to impact, saying:

*“We are trying to advocate for social prescription, so we have to be able to say ‘a child must come so many times before they experience mental health outcomes in the programme.’ So we have to link attendance to impact, if that makes sense?”* (M+E 1)

## 6.4. MOTIVATION

The third main theme to emerge during data collection and analysis was that of motivation. This theme attempts to describe the pressures exerted on individuals and organisations which influence the collection and utilisation of attendance data. Pressures can be structural, interpersonal, or procedural, and can motivate the collection of good quality data, or can motivate the collection of ‘bad’ data, or no data.

This section will again follow the structure set out by the sub-questions to this thesis’ central research question, so will firstly address the motivations influencing fieldworkers’ relationship with attendance data collection, some of which promote the collection of good quality data, and some of which act as a barrier to quality data collection. It will then address the motivations influencing the relationships between M+E staff and attendance data.

### 6.4.1. *MOTIVATIONS INFLUENCING ATTENDANCE DATA AT THE LEVEL OF DATA COLLECTION* *(FIELDWORKERS)*

#### 6.4.1.1. **“The kids” as the primary motivation for fieldworkers**

All fieldworkers (Fieldworkers 1-5) reported that their primary motivation at work was “the kids”, or the beneficiaries of the programme. This was the case for each specific role (sports coach, creche

facilitator) and was reported in each case as being firmly the primary motivator for respondents. One sports coach stated that:

*“I think the kids are most important, and just the passion for the sport. I mean, I don't like taking the sport or a job for granted. But yes, for me it's 100% the kids that get me up in the morning, and also keep me passionate at work! With this kind of work you can't turn up with a frown, because the kids will always feel that energy.”* (Fieldworker 1)

#### **6.4.1.2. Administrative tasks as “extra” to the fieldworker role**

Some fieldworkers (Fieldworkers 1,3,4) reported feeling that ‘administrative’ tasks such as collecting attendance data did not align with their primary motivations at work, building relationships with the beneficiaries of the programme. These fieldworkers reported that administrative tasks felt more like a chore due to the lack of alignment with their primary motivations. One fieldworker stated:

*“I'm a coach, and I want to coach! ... Yeah, you don't sign up to coach so that you can spend your time doing the register, you know? My skills are with cricket and soccer, and the admin side isn't the centre of my job. I get it's needed, but yeah, it doesn't feel like the main part of the coach role.”* (Fieldworker 1)

This finding was corroborated by M+E staff at the same organisations, who expressed an understanding that fieldworkers viewed administrative tasks as ‘separate’ to their core responsibilities, and reported that this was because these tasks did not have an obvious link to benefits for the beneficiaries:

*“Yeah, I think coaches know we have to collect data to keep funders happy and report on the programme, but they see it as very separate from their job or from how it benefits them or how it benefits children. But that's obviously it is an important function, but a shitty one sometimes because you are led by funders collect certain data and report them a certain way to keep them happy, but it's part of it.”* (M+E 2)

Alternatively, one fieldworker (Fieldworker 3) reported more motivation to engage in the 'administrative' side of their work. In this organisation, there was a more pronounced focus on the process and importance of M+E at every level, with fieldworkers taking part in mandatory M+E training as part of their annual trainings. This M+E training included discussions and workshops about how M+E processes could contribute to the wellbeing of the beneficiaries and staff at the organisation. The fieldworker reported:

*"Yeah, with the registers it's part of the same thing we were talking about earlier ... Yeah, we're [the coaches] an important part of the M+E chain. Without us doing the registers properly [M+E officer] and [M+E officer] wouldn't be able to do their job. It's important for [M+E officer] and for the organisation and the kids as well."* (Fieldworker 3)

#### **6.4.1.3. Fieldworkers feeling pressure to artificially inflate attendance statistics**

Some fieldworkers (Fieldworkers 3,4) reported artificially increasing beneficiary attendance at their sessions (marking as present beneficiaries who were, in fact, absent) to meet a perceived organisational pressure. One fieldworker described experiencing this:

*"Well (laughs) if I can say this, that sometimes we might say that we had 20 kids at the creche that day, but maybe we had 10 kids, understand? Because there should be 20 kids, and [M+E officer] would ask questions like "why didn't you have the 20 kids today?" So there can definitely be some pressure."* (Fieldworker 4)

In this case, the numbers of beneficiaries reached is perceived by the fieldworker to be of more importance to M+E staff than correct data. When asked about this, one M+E officer reported understanding this motivation, saying:

*"When you are not on the on the ground, you don't see the fuck ups they make. You don't see what they do, and they just ticking people because at the end of the day, I want ticks! I want a*

*certain amount, I'm telling them that their numbers are down, I'm telling them to pick their numbers up, I'm telling them to do certain things. And so they're gonna make it as if it's higher because I'm not there all the time.” (M+E 1)*

#### *6.4.2. MOTIVATIONS INFLUENCING ATTENDANCE DATA AT THE LEVEL OF DATA COLLATION, ANALYSIS AND REPORTING (M+E DEPARTMENTS)*

This section will outline the pressures influencing the management of attendance data at the level of M+E departments and staff. It will first outline the broader reported motivation of these respondents at work, followed by findings related to processes, structures and relationships which influence the use of attendance data.

##### **6.4.2.1. “Beneficiaries” as a primary motivator for M+E staff**

As with fieldworkers, M+E staff (M+E 1-5) reported that their primary motivator at work was the beneficiaries of the programme. They consistently reported that their work was motivated and enriched by their impact on beneficiaries. One M+E officer reported:

*“The kids are a huge motivator, absolutely. It’s, yeah, it’s the main difference between why I get so much more out of this than the corporate stuff. There’s more money there, but it’s not the same.” (M+E 2)*

M+E staff from well-resourced organisations (M+E 1,2) described their motivation surrounding beneficiaries in more systemic, macro-level terms than those staff from CBOs (M+E 3,4). One M+E officer from a well-resourced NGO described her motivations during report writing as follows:

*“At the end of the day, the foundation of any programme that I work for, obviously has to align to my values as a person, and if my values align with the organisation's, then it will be that the intervention needs to be for all the kids, not just that one particular child.” (M+E 1)*

Whereas a member of M+E staff from a CBO, who tended to have more regular contact with the beneficiaries as part of her role, described her beneficiary-focussed motivation as follows:

*“It's like taking what you're feeling and putting it onto paper so that I can explain to the world what you're feeling, or what you're seeing in that child.” (M+E 3)*

#### **6.4.2.2. Funders as motivators for attendance data**

##### *6.4.2.2.1. Funders interested in absolute attendance (reach) only*

Funders represented a large portion of conversation about attendance data and its various uses, and the motivation for its collection across all respondents. However, different organisations had vastly different perceptions of funder pressure with regards to this specific data type. M+E officers who had formal training, and understood the importance of attendance data for impact assessment (see Section 3.2.2.3), reported feeling motivated to demonstrate impact using attendance data, but both (M+E 1,2) reported that funders were generally not asking for duration and intensity of attendance and impact data to be linked. One M+E officer stated:

*“I must say I think even linking outcomes data to dosage we've never never never been asked to do. And a friend of mine that worked at [other organisation] asked me the same question, she used to do their MEL, she said the same. She also asked "Have we ever linked outcomes to dosage?" And I said to her "No, we actually haven't because no one's ever asked us." And I think especially in the sport for development sector, like any outcomes are wins, they're not really too perturbed about how much of the programme a child got, and if there's a relationship between that and the outcomes.” (M+E 2)*

Another M+E officer reported that only “reach” (absolute attendance) data was being requested by funders:

*“Because I do think in, like the sport for development sector and after school space, like one of the main things is definitely reach. How many children do you reach? It's what everyone wants to know, how many children do you reach? [...] And I'm not even talking about dosage because I think you're gonna find with a lot of organisations you work with that dosage is not even something that a lot of funders ask, and it's nearly not even something that a lot of organisations look at. Or understand.” (M+E 1).*

#### 6.4.2.2.2. Attendance data as a bargaining tool

Whilst the M+E staff from the organisations mentioned in section 4.2.1.1 reported that funders generally did not request attendance data in a more detailed form than “reach”, they also reported that providing funders with better quality attendance data, which more accurately broke down the engagement levels of beneficiaries across by utilising intensity and duration of dosage, allowed them to request funders adjust targets. One M+E officer stated:

*“You can say, “This is what our data shows we've done. We've put in all the inputs, we've done all the activities, we've done everything according to our theory of change, and these are the outputs. So yeah, high quality data and good M+E can for sure act as a bargaining chip” (M+E 1)*

Another stated that their financial security allowed them to shift funders’ requested indicators more easily, because they were able to be more specific about beneficiary attendance over the course of the programme:

*“Because financially we're so strong, we can now use that data [attendance data, specifically beneficiary dosages], we often over the past couple of years, I would say probably since about 2018, use that data to write to funders when we renew grants and asked them to shift some of the outcomes or indicators they funded us for in the past. I think a lot of NGOs that's financially not as stable are quite funder lead or funder driven, but we're more learning driven.” (M+E 2)*



This ability to use attendance data to bargain with funders was not echoed at all by M+E staff from less-resourced organisations.

#### 6.4.2.2.3. *Funders as a source of pressure to selectively report attendance*

M+E staff from well-resourced organisations reported feeling pressure from funders to report favourable or untrue attendance data, as opposed to the most accurate or nuanced data they were collecting. One M+E officer stated:

*“So you are running a programme with an 80 kid deficit - your deficit is 80 kids, because you don't have the funding for the 80 kids, but you needed to stretch that [report false numbers] because you promised 340 to the to the funder - you agreed on 340.” (M+E 1)*

Another M+E officer reported that a lack of ‘progressive’ thinking among funders meant that their organisation felt afraid to report failings which lead to reduced attendance, which they would prefer to view as opportunities for learning:

*“I think organisations are under a lot of pressure. The thing is, it's probably not coming from nowhere. I do think a lot of funders are not progressive enough, if that's the right word, or open minded enough to learn that sometimes things don't work.” (M+E 2)*

The same M+E officer reported that she often reports on reach because it looks more impressive to a funder than a full report about meaningfully engaged beneficiaries:

*“If our targets are 2000, we say we've reached them. And I've written in all our reports now that those children have come at least once. But then meaningful engagement was probably like between a third and 50%. And I would say these are the children that come at least every second week or during COVID, at least once a month. And we do think that they are the children that really benefited. But I won't just report on that group of children, because then funders would*

*be like "but we paid you 2000 Rand, we paid you for 2000 children." So there's definitely pressure."* (M+E 2)

However, an M+E officer from a less-resourced organisation (M+E 3) reported not experiencing this pressure relating to attendance data from funders, even when specifically asked about it:

*"The funders are interested in our reach, but it's not a big stress for me (laughs). I think they care much more about the finances and how we spend the money. Of course they ask for our reach, but it's included in the narrative of our report. You know? Not a section by itself."* (M+E 3)

## 6.5. CONCLUSION

The above findings highlighted three key themes which influenced and characterised respondents' relationships to attendance data within their organisations. Firstly, capacity concerns were raised by all respondents. These capacity barriers tended to be exacerbated, if not caused, by the repetitive and continuous nature of attendance data. It is data that needs to be maintained at every stage of organisational programming and is labour and time intensive to effectively utilise as a result. Further to capacity barriers experienced by all respondents, issues arose under the broad themes of (1) understanding of attendance data and (2) motivation to utilise accurate/inaccurate data. Among fieldworkers and M+E staff who lacked formal M+E training, understanding of attendance data tended to be limited to absolute measures of attendance, and understandings of use cases were limited as a result. Among formally trained M+E officers, the types and use cases of attendance data extended to dosage, and the resultant use case within impact assessment.

Motivation to manage attendance data accurately was varied across respondents between different organisations and roles within organisations. Fieldworkers' broader motivation at work, which was reported as being derived primarily from personal relationships with beneficiaries, did not align with

their understanding of the use cases of attendance data, which was reported as being primarily to serve the interests of funders, with child safeguarding as a secondary understanding. For M+E staff in smaller, less-resourced CBOs, who both had responsibilities involving direct contact with the beneficiaries, their motivation also tended to be drawn from beneficiaries at a more individual level, with macro-level impact assessment not a reported motivation. This aligned with their understanding of absolute attendance data rather than intensity or duration, which are required metrics for impact assessment. The formally trained M+E staff, who also happened not to engage with beneficiaries as part of their job, also cited the beneficiaries as the primary motivating factor behind their work, but at a macro level, where impact assessment replaced personal interaction with beneficiaries as demonstration of success. Among these M+E staff, who valued intensity and duration of attendance as a contributing factor in impact assessment, their motivations did align with their understanding.

However, M+E staff who were motivated to collect and utilise more in-depth measures of attendance found that pressure from 'above' (from funders) did not align with their own motivations when attendance data was concerned. All M+E staff reported that funders were generally only interested in 'reach' data. For these organisations, financial stability and surplus capacity allowed them to gather more detailed attendance data and use it for impact assessment, even when funders did not request this data. Organisation 2 had taken their dosage data (duration x intensity of attendance) back to a funder and requested that the funder provide resources for ongoing impact assessment, allowing M+E staff at that organisation to work with researchers at UCT to assess the efficacy of their curriculum. This is a good example of M+E staff from better-resourced organisations using clean, accurate and detailed attendance data (and M+E data more broadly) as a "bargaining tool" in negotiations with funders.

The pressure from 'above' experienced by M+E staff was generally reported as being related to the organisation's total reach. M+E staff from a variety of organisations reported experiencing pressure to 'meet targets' relating to their reach. Responses to this pressure varied from selective reporting of certain statistics in one case, to fabrication of attendance data in another. Fieldworkers also

experienced similar pressure to 'meet targets', reportedly emanating from M+E staff within their organisations. It seems likely, in this case, that pressure experienced by M+E staff from funders was being handed down to fieldworkers. The impacts of this multi-level pressure to report volume over accuracy of attendance are (1) that fabrication and selective reporting takes place at each level of the data chain, and (2) that a culture of mistrust and gamesmanship is built around attendance data.

To conclude, 'attendance' is a strenuous data point, which requires both fine levels of detail and protracted effort to collect and collate accurately. Each actor involved in the chain of data collection, collation and analysis may see the data as meeting or contributing to different objectives or goals, and may not have a good understanding of the ways in which different types of attendance data contribute to these goals. Funders, who sit at the 'top' of the data chain, were reported as having a primary focus on reach over impact or programme efficacy, and this contributed to a culture of mistrust surrounding attendance data at each level. The reduction of capacity barriers through the use of technical solutions mitigated other concerns, as did organisation wide training on the value of good quality attendance data and the alignment and communication of the objectives it is supposed to serve.

## 7. DISCUSSION

### 7.1. INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This chapter will be used to reflect upon the findings which came about through the application of this thesis' chosen methodological instruments. Firstly, as regards their relationships to each other, and secondly; as regards their relationships to extant literature or contributions to gaps therein. The structure will broadly follow the structure of the previous chapter, as well as the sub-questions to the central research question, discussing barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data (in the context of nonprofit organisational functioning) in the following sections:

1. Human capacity-related barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data at the level of both the fieldworker and the M+E staff member,
2. The iterative nature of attendance data as a barrier to the utilisation of good-quality attendance datasets,
3. The mitigation of human capacity-related barriers offered by electronic data collection (EDC) tools when compared with pen-and-paper data collection (PPDC), and barriers to the adoption of these tools,
4. The genesis of human capacity barriers to effective attendance data usage in relation to a lack of financial capacity,
5. Barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data relating to systems of accountability.

These sections will provide structure to the discussion without being rigid. Whilst each occupy their own discussion, themes of motivation and capacity are salient in each section, as these are important factors in completing any organisational task. Also underlying these broad discussion areas will be a consideration of how respondent and organisational positionality, as they relate to funders and beneficiaries, could impact the effective utilisation of attendance data. The chapter will then provide some recommendations for avenues of further research, as well as some recommendations for

practitioners at various levels of the attendance data hierarchy, with a particular focus on funders. It will conclude with some of this research's limitations.

## 7.2. CAPACITY-RELATED BARRIERS TO THE EFFECTIVE UTILISATION OF ATTENDANCE DATA

### 7.2.1. CAPACITY BARRIERS AT THE LEVEL OF DATA COLLECTION – THE FIELDWORKER

To follow the flow of attendance data “up the chain”, one must begin with the point of data collection. This research found that respondents working as fieldworkers for health-promotion NPOs overwhelmingly reported a shortage of human capacity at the point of service delivery (see 2.1.1). This is a factor that is reflected within the literature for NPOs locally in the Western Cape, with Skhosana (2020:56) reporting that there is a severe lack of human resources among NPO employees rendering social services in the region. She states that “the lack of social workers exacerbates the workload problem, as the remaining employees are called upon to assume the duties of their coworkers.” Each of the organisations included in this researcher's sample has children as their primary beneficiaries, and Martin (2010) provides more targeted research into capacity related issues for such organisations in South Africa. She outlines a “scarcity of human resources in the sphere of child protection and early intervention” in South Africa (ibid:73-74). The respondents in this study crucially cited capacity constraints whether or not digital attendance tracking software was used.

### 7.2.2. CAPACITY BARRIERS AT THE LEVEL OF DATA COLLATION, ANALYSIS AND REPORTING – M+E

#### STAFF

As reported by respondents (see 2.2.3), barriers to the effective collation of attendance data existed in the relationship between field staff and M+E staff. Continuing to follow the flow of attendance data, this lack of effective data governance represents the first capacity challenge to M+E staff. Lietaent (2018:21) argues that when data governance plans around attendance data are weak, and lack clear responsibilities for staff and procedures for data management, attendance data quality can suffer. With a dataset as continuous and voluminous as attendance, if proper data management plans are not in

place, the transfer of data between parties can represent a key point of data loss. This has been reflected in informal conversations and interviews among those interviewed in this study, with a variety of field staff and M+E staff describing reams of paper attendance registers blown away on a beach or sports field, or left in taxis.

The lack of human capacity to digitally manipulate and report on attendance data (see 2.2.5) was reported in some manner by each of the respondents in an M+E role. This is echoed by Fiester (2004:10), who reports that the process of data collation by non-specialist staff can be highly burdensome. She quotes researcher Carolyn Marzke, who states that “it’s not so hard to take attendance, but at some point those data have to be entered into in a computer. Lack of expertise about data and technology at a programme level can make that difficult.” This was reflected in the findings of this research, with less-resourced organisations particularly lacking in the technical training and knowledge which would assuage these barriers.

Not only was the workload associated with attendance data reported as a barrier at the level of the fieldworker, but also across M+E departments. Trained staff working in M&E positions have historically been difficult to retain. Patel et al (2012:218) report that NPOs in South Africa have historically “struggled to attract black social workers to senior positions, because their remuneration packages are less attractive than government posts.” It is also widely acknowledged that NPO staff often “wear various hats” at work, and fulfil multiple roles (Sondi 2011). Their time is often stretched between multiple tasks, and, as argue Morariu et al (2016:8), evaluation capacity varies drastically between organisations of various sizes:

*“Evaluation staffing varies dramatically among nonprofit organizations. One in five large organizations and almost one in ten medium organizations have evaluation staff. Not surprisingly, small organizations are very unlikely to have evaluation staff. While this difference in staff resources is intuitive, organizations without evaluation staff are still frequently expected to collect data, measure their results, and report data to internal and external audiences.”*

The disparity in M+E capacity across organisations, as mentioned above, was also apparent in the findings of this research, and was echoed by respondents (see 2.2.4, 2.2.5, 2.2.6). Ultimately, without human capacity to not only analyse data, but also to oversee and encourage its collection, the data will be of low quality (contain inaccuracies or omissions) or will take a significant amount of time to analyse, such that many of its uses are rendered irrelevant.

### 7.3. THE REPETITIVE NATURE OF ATTENDANCE DATA AS A COMPOUNDING FACTOR

Compounding the above-mentioned tight margins of human capacity at the level of service delivery and M+E, according to respondents, is the iterative nature of attendance data collection. Rather than being a once-off data point, like the initial collection of a beneficiary's demographic details, or a programme pre- or post-test, attendance is a data set that requires constant attention if it is to be used effectively beyond the point of absolute attendance. This factor was reported by fieldworkers regardless of whether data was collected manually or digitally (see 2.1.5).

In her study of perceptions of M+E processes, Mebrahtu (2002:12) highlights the same challenge with repetitive M+E data. She discusses a dynamic in which motivation to engage in protracted, repetitive data collection wanes among fieldworkers due to a lack of feedback about the data's destinations and ultimate uses from more senior staff. Respondents in her research "generally attributed the neglect of such duties to the sheer volume of data generated by such monitoring systems and the subsequent shortage of time." A barrier to the effective utilisation of attendance data is presented here when data are not collected accurately and shared timeously, due to fieldworker perceptions that the data ends up 'in a vacuum'.

### 7.4. PEN-AND-PAPER SYSTEMS CAN BE IMPROVED UPON USING ELECTRONIC DATA COLLECTION

The above-mentioned human resource constraints only begin to explain the difficulties faced in the collection of attendance data, however. For organisations where attendance is tracked manually, using "pen-and-paper" systems, fieldworkers reported that this method is inefficient and unwieldy. Literature



which explores the question of general electronic data collection (EDC) versus pen-and-paper data collection (PPDC) is abundant (see Zeleke et al 2019; Tate et al 2021; Malik et al 2015), and whilst case-by-case limitations of EDC are highlighted, it is still widely regarded as a superior method of data collection as far as accuracy and efficiency are concerned (where resources allow). Despite the wealth of literature on broader systems of data capture, literature on the digitisation of attendance data is confined almost entirely to European and American university classrooms and schools (Selwyn et al 2021; Tewkesbury et al 2018), which present a highly specified and controlled environment for the collection of such data, and as such are not entirely transferrable in their analysis to barriers experienced by NPOs in collecting that data in the Global South.

However, learnings can be drawn from the broader literature on EDC versus PPDC which are applicable to this research. The first and arguably most important limitation of PPDC is that of data accuracy. Each time data transcription is required, the likelihood of human error, and therefore inaccuracies in data, increases, particularly with long, repetitive data sets. This is outlined by Mosa et al (2015:1), who describe the two steps (data collection and data transcription) as being “inefficient in terms of data accuracy.” Not only is human error a source of inaccuracy in this case, but outright loss of data in the forms of entire sheets of attendance registers, for example. Mosa et al (ibid) also highlight that this multiple-step process sacrifices timeliness and efficiency, with the same data being manually worked on by multiple staff members. This is confirmed in attendance-specific literature; Liutenant et al (2018:22) state that the use of PPDC in attendance tracking introduces the likelihood of error. They state that “data quality is at risk when any data are transferred from handwritten notes.” And that when fieldworkers “are not able to enter attendance data directly into an electronic system, and must instead submit paper attendance rosters to their school office staff for manual data entry, the timeliness of the data may be negatively impacted due to delays during attendance data entry” (Ibid).

In the case of attendance, EDC systems enable more up-to-date data to be leveraged by M+E teams. The benefits of this kind of immediacy are not only related to the lack of time spent doing time-

consuming data entry, but also stem from the ability to make use of data to improve beneficiary outcomes. An example of this would be the tracking and reduction of beneficiary drop-out from a programme. Using traditional PPDC methods, where data must be physically collated and entered into a digital database, the time between a beneficiary's absence at a programme session, and that absence being digitised and identified by M+E staff can be weeks or months, if that identification takes place at all. In the case of a properly implemented EDC system, leveraging what Malik et al (2015) describes as "logic checks to highlight discrepancies to site staff during data entry", M+E staff might not need to be involved at all. Using a nervous system as an analogy, participant drop out would be identifiable as a 'reflex', with field staff able to leverage technological solutions to identify participant drop out without needing to engage in time and capacity-consuming back-and-forth with M+E departments, as is required in PPDC systems. Another example of a digital attendance tracking system used to automate an otherwise multi-step process would be the screening of duplicated data. For example, if a beneficiary's demographic details are collected using such a system, duplicate beneficiary records (a common source of data inaccuracy in attendance data) can be automatically screened and managed, as outlined above by Malik et al (2015).

It seems clear, then, that EDC solutions would serve only to reduce barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data for NPOs in South Africa and elsewhere. However, their adoption is far from widespread, with only one of four responding organisations from my sample making use of such a system. Whilst no study has been done into the breadth of adoption of EDC solutions for attendance among South African NPOs, my personal experience consulting in the sector has shown me that only the very most well-resourced NPOs have implemented these kinds of solutions, and even in this bracket adoption has not been widespread, particularly considering the benefits outlined above. Fiester (2004:14) describes the dynamic:

*"Electronic processing systems make it easier and faster to analyze and use data later on. But they carry financial costs—in the form of computers, software, and sometimes Internet access—*

*and human resource costs, in the form of technical skills needed by the staff who perform data entry.”*

The primary barrier to the adoption of these types of software seems to be cost, but Mokwena & Hlebela (2018) outline a broader system of challenges faced by South African SMEs (explicitly including NPOs) in the attempt to adopt software-as-a-service products, such as those required to track attendance. They argue that South African organisations face unique challenges when compared to similar organisations in the Global North, where they describe the challenges as “virtually non-existent or negligible.” (Ibid). These challenges begin with a lack of efficient, reliable and affordable digital infrastructure. Mathur et al (2015) highlight barriers to internet access for South African mobile users. Firstly, data costs are “significantly higher in South Africa than more developed settings.” Secondly, users in South Africa tend to access the internet via pre-paid plans, as opposed to regularly billed, unlimited plans as is common across the Global North. The impact of this inability to access the internet is that if an organisation is unable or unwilling to provide data to their fieldworkers to engage in EDC, those fieldworkers will be equally unable or unwilling to facilitate internet access by their own means. Furthermore, access to internet enabled devices in communities generally targeted by NPO programming is limited, and the risk of theft of these devices disproportionately high (Manayilo 2014). Further, Mokwena & Hlebela (2018) highlight that a lack of skills and a lack of end-user and licensing support present barriers to the adoption of software solutions for South African SMEs and NPOs. They found that decision makers in these organisations had adequate knowledge of the availability of relevant software solutions to meet their needs, but that there was only a very slight correlation between knowledge of a technical solution and its adoption in the South African context. A stark and well-documented “digital divide” exists in South Africa (Gillwald et al 2018), with a gap in technological access and skills extant along socio-economic lines. If digital literacy can be broadly defined along the same lines as Heitin (2016), who describes it as “the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and

technical skills”, then those living in poverty in South Africa lack comparable digital literacy to Global North countries, or to members of more well-resourced communities within South Africa itself (Gillwald et al 2018). Further research has been done into barriers to adoption of technology to facilitate the work of ECD practitioners in South Africa, who made up a small proportion of this research’s sample, and comprise a significant number of NPO field workers in the country. Ogegbo & Aina (2020) found that whilst ECD practitioners have a “positive mindset” concerning the incorporation of digital solutions in the sector, barriers including technological resources, lack of knowledge, and lack of training mean that adoption of these solutions remains limited.

From my own experience in the sector, a lack of linguistic support within software solutions can also present a significant barrier to the adoption of software for many NPO employees, predominantly field workers, whose native language is less frequently English. Apps and websites which facilitate NPOs’ project and core functions, including attendance tracking, are overwhelmingly provided only in European languages, and I have yet to see any with translations into African languages, including Afrikaans and isiXhosa, both languages widely spoken by NPO fieldworkers in Cape Town.

Whilst barriers to the adoption of EDC systems for tracking attendance data are numerous, particularly for South African NPOs, there is room for tempered optimism in this area. With access to the internet increasing across the less-resourced areas of society – albeit frustratingly slowly – the smaller organisations which currently struggle most to access technological solutions will be able to leverage these systems more easily. Free-to-use solutions such as Google Forms would enable organisations with financial constraints to collect data, but these rely heavily on internet access, so improvements in access need to improve to reduce this barrier.

#### 7.5. A LACK OF FINANCIAL CAPACITY TO FACILITATE GOOD QUALITY ATTENDANCE TRACKING

When discussing each of the above capacity constraints to the effective utilisation of attendance data, including a dearth of human capacity at the level of the fieldworker and within M+E departments, as well as a lack of technical capacity in the form of digital attendance tracking platforms, the lack of

financial capacity is consistent, particularly as concerns the core functions of organisations such as M+E and therefore attendance tracking. This section will broadly outline financial issues at NPOs, followed by a discussion of the “non-profit starvation cycle”, and will then link these issues to the specific issue of attendance data use.

Financial issues have been at the forefront of barriers to NPO operation since at least the global financial crash of 2008, with literature highlighting that this has been a particularly prevalent issue since that time (Bowman 2011; Akintola 2016; Leonard 2014). Organisations were forced to adjust their structures, which included continuing to rely on a reduced staff, particularly in their “core” operations (Akintola 2016). This dearth of funding for more ‘back office’ activities – as opposed to “programme” costs such as sports equipment, books, and fieldworker pay – has been traced to the imposition of, and reliance upon, administrative cost ratios on the part of funders. As described by Burkart et al (2018:308), administrative cost ratios (otherwise known as programme ratios or core cost ratios) are a widely used benchmark which describe the ratio of overhead costs relative to total expenses. Lecy and Searing (2015:3) argue that these ratios are used “as a substitute for true measures of the output efficiency of a nonprofit.” The ratios, they argue, are used because the data is easily extracted from an NPOs public financial reporting, and provide easily quantifiable decision-making metrics when funders are faced with a wide range of NPOs to donate to. Bowman (2006) describes overhead costs as all expenses that are not related to direct programming, and include costs for office staff, supplies and rent at an organisational headquarters, including, crucially, M+E staff and processes.

The extensive use of administrative cost ratios by funders has resulted in what is known as the Nonprofit Starvation Cycle. The cycle is described by Goggins-Gregory and Howard (2009) as involving three stages. In the first stage, funders express unrealistically restrictive expectations about the overhead spending required to run an NPO. As a result of this, at the second stage, NPOs experience these expressed expectations as pressure to conform to an unrealistically stringent standard of low overhead spending. At the third stage of the cycle, NPOs respond to this pressure by firstly spending too little on

overhead, and secondly by underreporting their overhead spending in financial and fundraising documentation. This underreporting and underspending further serves to perpetuate unrealistic expectations among funders. Over time, “funders expect grantees to do more and more with less and less” (ibid).

The impacts of the Nonprofit Starvation Cycle are particularly noteworthy in the context of this research for a number of reasons. Firstly, as outlined by Boyes-Watson and Bortcosh (2022:9), insufficient cost recovery is a global problem, with evidence suggesting that “organisations based outside Europe/UK/North America are less confident and experienced to recover their costs and are significantly less likely to receive the flexible general support used to cover administration costs.” This increased impact of the Nonprofit Starvation Cycle on Global South NPOs is repeated on a smaller scale within South Africa, according to respondents in this study (see 2.2.6). NGOs – with more middle-class, white, well-educated staff – are more likely to be able to leverage data and reputation to recover administrative costs from funders than CBOs, smaller organisations which lack the reputational clout and ability to collect, collate and report effectively on their activity. We can therefore see the cycle playing out with specific reference to attendance data. Organisations with a smaller proportion of their administrative costs covered lack the ability to leverage data, which reduces funder willingness to cover administrative costs, and thus the mantra of “low pay, make do, and do without” (Goggins-Gregory and Howard 2009) extends directly to the management and utilisation of attendance data.

Goggins-Gregory and Howard (ibid) report that a portfolio manager at the Edna McConnell Clark foundation, a large funder who awarded more than \$350 million in grants in 2020 (EMCF 2020), corroborated exactly this dynamic. He stated that “The catch-22 is that, while organizations need capacity-building funding in order to invest in solid performance tracking, many funders want to see strong programme outcome data *before* they will provide such general operating support.” Whilst this literature does not directly reference attendance tracking specifically, it is appropriate to mention here, as attendance tracking constitutes a crucial part of performance tracking for any NPO providing a

service where attendance is relevant. Funding gaps, particularly those associated with administrative cost ratios, are therefore a clear barrier to the effective collection and utilisation of attendance data. With a dearth of administrative funding, organisations are left short of M+E staff, and unable to afford technological solutions. This dynamic was visible in the findings of this research, with less-resourced organisations trapped in a cycle of low core cost coverage and poor infrastructural investment, and better-resourced organisations able to leverage the data gathered using strong infrastructure to justify core cost coverage to funders.

#### 7.6. ACCOUNTABILITY AS A MOTIVATION TO REPORT DATA SELECTIVELY OR INACCURATELY

Accountability was a major theme identified during the data analysis stage of this research. M+E staff and fieldworkers alike frequently discussed attendance data with reference to its function within accountability processes. In order to explore attendance data's relation to accountability and any barriers presented therein, it will be important to outline a conceptual framework of organisational accountability, a notoriously nebulous and contested concept (Dhanani & Connolly 2012; Ebrahim 2002; Christensen & Ebrahim 2006). It has been described in various ways, including an organisation giving an account of their actions (Lawry 1995), and as more closely related to "felt responsibility" (Fry 1995). Ebrahim (2003:815) argue that accountability is a complex and dynamic concept, which "may be defined not only as a means through which organisations and individuals may be held responsible for their actions, but also as a means by which organisations and individuals take internal responsibility for shaping their organizational mission and values, for opening themselves to public or external scrutiny, and for assessing performance in relation to goals." Chu & Luke (2021:5) describe NPOs as "values based" and "financially dependent" organisations, stating that they therefore require legitimacy in order to secure funding and ensure onward programming. Accountability, they argue, is a crucial tool in building this legitimacy. The following paragraphs will draw primarily from a stakeholder theory of accountability, as it more closely aligns with the variety of accountability pressures reported by respondents. Ebrahim (2003) describes a stakeholder theory of accountability as facilitating a wider and

more inclusive perspective on organisational accountability, recognising the need to account to and for a variety of constituencies.

Within the stakeholder framework, Dhanani & Connolly evaluate the communications of NPOs (crucially, for the purposes of this study, including their use of M&E data in communications) against two models within the broader stakeholder theory of accountability. Firstly, they posit the ethical model, which “interprets the function of an organisation on the basis of underlying moral and philosophical principles” (Dhanani & Connolly 2012:1143) and postulates that organisations have a responsibility to honour all stakeholders fairly. In the context of this research, this would imply openness and honesty in data reporting and analysis, with organisations evaluating the data with reference to their stated objectives. Ebrahim (2003) succinctly defines this accountability within this model as being borne from a set of ethical principles, and linked to ensuring the public trust is served.

In contrast, Dhanani & Connolly posit the positive model of stakeholder accountability. Within this model, which is more closely linked to a legitimacy theory of accountability (ibid:1143), we can view organisations as being concerned more with their long-term survival and success than with the ethical and moral principles in which they are founded. In terms of accountability, the implications of this model are that organisations are beholden to the support of their various stakeholders, and that in order to gain and maintain this support, they need to continually legitimise their activities to these same stakeholders. Within the positive model, organisations are allowed to ‘manage’ their stakeholders in order to ensure their continued approval (Merkl-Davis et al 2011). Therefore, within the positive model, we can view accountability as a “purposive means with which organisations seek constituent support to protect their own self-interests” (Dhanani & Connolly 2012:1143).

This research found that organisations’ M+E departments felt pressure from funders to either report data selectively, or inaccurately, in order to retain ‘impressive’ attendance statistics (see 4.1.3, 4.2.1.3). Within the models of stakeholder accountability outlined above, we can see that the results of this research would place M+E departments’ experience of accountability firmly within the positive model.



Dhanani & Connolly (ibid:1144) explore processes by which organisations, operating under the positive model of stakeholder accountability, seek to legitimise their activity through reporting, which they call impression management. One of the key methods of impression management cited is known as concealment, which is the process of omitting bad news, and drawing attention to strengths, “in an attempt to present their organisations in a positive light” (ibid.) Within this framework, organisations seek to “downplay or withhold negative, material information, while disclosing less relevant, positive information” (ibid.) This is corroborated by Mebrahtu (2002:505) who highlights that “negative information is unlikely to appear in NGO reports unless staff are confident that such information cannot jeopardise future funding.”

In the specific context of attendance data reporting within the above accountability framework, organisations often choose to report on broad quarterly or annual “reach” statistics (a measure of absolute attendance, with little utility in terms of impact assessment or programme decision-making), because a more detailed report of attendance would be less impressive. For example, an organisation might report that they “reached” 1000 beneficiaries across a given year. This might be true, but what is absent from the organisation’s report is the fact that of the 1000 beneficiaries “reached”, 500 of them attended the programme only once during the year. This is a clear example of the aforementioned strategy of concealment, with M+E staff selecting statistics from their attendance datasets which they reportedly understand to be fundamentally truthful, but misleading. This dynamic can be viewed as a barrier to the effective utilisation of attendance data, because whilst inaccurate data may serve to benefit organisations in cases where funding is contingent on meeting attendance targets, it clearly reduces the utility of that data in other use cases, such as accurate impact assessment and programme improvement, therefore representing a barrier for the purposes of this research.

As well as offering a framework within which we can understand organisations’ data disclosure strategies, Dhanani & Connolly applied that framework to the public (and some donor-facing) reporting of the 75 largest NPOs operating in the UK, analysing the extent to which they presented positive and

negative information across a range of categories. They (Dhanani & Connolly 2012:1159) found that only 6 percent of organisations reported negative information relating to programming outcomes, and that 80 percent of all annual reviews were exclusively positive, with no negative information whatsoever. The disclosure practices of organisations were more closely aligned to those seen in corporate and public sector organisations where “public discourse has also been guided by issues of interest, importance and concern to external stakeholders” (ibid.) Whilst the sampling and scope of their study is different from this one, important generalisations about patterns of NPO reporting can be drawn which align with this study’s findings. NPOs are reluctant to include negative information in funder-facing reports.

Whilst the findings of the aforementioned study are certainly pertinent to the question of attendance data and its barriers, the accountability dynamic proposed in a positive stakeholder model has further ramifications for the questions posed by this study. M+E staff from smaller CBOs reported that (see 4.2.1.3) funders did not require reporting of attendance data in any more detail than “reach”, with one member of M+E staff stating that “of course they ask for our reach, but it’s included in the narrative of the report.” Herein lies a further, and arguably more overwhelming barrier to the collection of attendance data. In terms of accountability, some organisations are required to report on only the measure of attendance data which provides them with the least utility. Reach data cannot be used for meaningful impact assessment, nor can it be used easily to inform programme decisions around resources or strategic direction. Given the above-mentioned capacity and financial constraints faced by organisations, particularly those smaller organisations, any M+E processes which are ‘surplus’ to funders’ requirements, such as the collection and collation of more detailed attendance data, are “done without” (Goggins Gregory and Howard 2009). Conversely, as reported in this study (see 6.4.2.2.2), better-funded organisations with stronger reporting were able to leverage high-quality, digitised tracking of attendance data (including dosage statistics at both the beneficiary level, and aggregated across their programmes), to shift the outcomes and indicators tracked in their grants.

As mentioned above, accountability is a tool used by organisations to gain the legitimacy crucial to onward funding, and the findings of this research indicate that the accountability afforded by the higher-quality, denser attendance reporting of better-resourced NGOs contributes to the maintenance of legitimacy in front of funders, which enables more funding (particularly more funding for core activities), and in turn better reporting, allowing these organisations to build upon a cycle of good data management, solid accountability, and high levels of legitimacy. Less well-funded (usually community based) organisations seem to find themselves in the opposite cycle, where a lack of core funding means proper attention cannot be paid to quality data management and impact assessment, in turn contributing to diminished accountability and a relative lack of legitimacy before funders. This process echoes the non-profit starvation cycle discussed above.

During the write-up phase of this thesis, I attended a roundtable organised by USAID and Synergy Global (a company that facilitates CSR initiatives, primarily for the energy and mining sectors) alongside a number of NPO M+E staff and representatives from corporate donors. The objective of the meeting was to unpack the use of indicators and a variety of data points, including attendance, in NPOs reporting to corporate funders. A major theme of the discussion raised by NPO staff was the disparity in the objectives of funders versus the objectives of NPOs themselves. After some discussion, the NPO staff in the group – who, it should be noted, exclusively represented smaller CBOs rather than larger, better resourced NGOs – agreed that a fundamental barrier in the NPO-funder relationship was the purpose of M+E. The participants in the round table conceptualised a logic model with a “line of funder accountability” (see Fig. 2). A logic model is used, per Cooksy et al (2000:119), to “depict assumptions about the resources needed to support programme activities and produce outputs, and the activities and outputs needed to realize the intended outcomes of the programme.” The logic model is used frequently by NPOs to conceptualise and plan their programming and is often a requirement of grant applications. The smaller organisations in attendance at the round table corroborated the dynamic discussed in the previous paragraphs, complaining that funders were only interested in the relatively easily measurable indicators of output (number of soccer sessions run, number of schoolbooks

distributed, for example). They described funders as being uninterested in holding their organisations to account for their outcomes and impact, and as being unwilling to fund these activities as a result. When asked about the impact on their attendance tracking, which each participant understood to be important and potentially valuable, their concerns mirrored those outlined above, that rigorous attendance tracking for the purposes of outcome and impact assessment was underfunded, and therefore impossible in some cases.

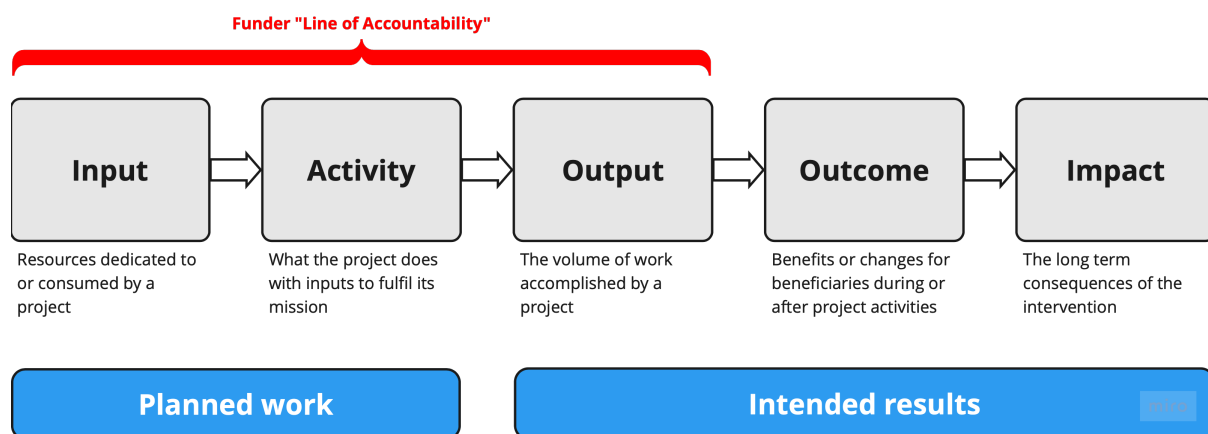


Fig. 2 – A logic model, indicating the line of funder accountability

Not only were issues of accountability negatively impacting data accuracy reported by M+E staff in their communications with funders, but also by field workers in their communications with M+E staff (see 6.4.1.3). There is scant available literature on strategies of concealment or outright data fabrication undertaken by field staff in their internal communications at NPOs, but this dynamic was corroborated by one M+E staff member, who described it as existing at multiple organisations she had worked with. The process of field worker data misrepresentation and concealment represents an interesting and important avenue for further research.

## 7.7. (A LACK OF) UNDERSTANDING OF ATTENDANCE DATA AS A BARRIER TO ITS EFFECTIVE UTILISATION

A theme that emerged repeatedly during the analysis of interview transcripts was a divergence in different actors' understandings of attendance data, both in terms of types (absolute, intensity, duration), in terms of use cases (accountability, resource allocation, safeguarding, for example), and in terms of the interaction between types and use cases (intensity and duration as required for impact assessment, for example). An assessment of individual and organisational understandings of attendance data is lacking in the literature. However, it has been apparent throughout my time consulting for NPOs on their attendance tracking that a lack of understanding of the types of attendance data and how they relate to the data's various uses presents a barrier to many organisations in the sector. During training sessions on attendance data collection with organisations who have previously not invested attention or resources, there is commonly a nebulous and ill-defined understanding that attendance data *is* important for the functioning of an organisation, but when pressed further, most M+E staff and fieldworkers report only that it is 'useful for M+E' in general terms. Importantly, the vast majority of my consulting work is focussed on CBOs, whose attendance tracking strategies are insufficient for all but the most rudimentary functions due to the reasons outlined so far.

Here we can see a lack of understanding of attendance data among less-resourced organisations as both compounding the above-mentioned capacity- and accountability-related factors, as well as itself being aggravated by those factors. Organisations that are not pressed for good-quality attendance data by funders and are therefore not provided financial resources to make the necessary infrastructure and capacity investments crucial for its management, do not have the time to invest in improving their understanding of the processes underlying its utility. Again, even in terms of investment in understanding, the adage of "low pay, do less, do without" applies to the attendance data management of those organisations trapped in the non-profit starvation cycle.

## 7.8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

First among the limitations of this study is generalisability due to a relatively small sample size, geographically clustered around Cape Town. As such, whilst many of the barriers raised by respondents

are representative of structural elements of the NPO-funder relationship, it is difficult to generalise any of the study's findings or contributions to NPOs in South Africa as a whole. However, such limitations are inherent in detailed, qualitative case study research. With a larger sample size covering a wider geographic area, further qualitative or quantitative research would be useful to expand our understanding of the concepts and barriers raised in this research.

It is important to acknowledge the diversity of organisations considered in this research. Whilst investigating the barriers to the utilisation of attendance data, it became clear that some organisations (generally those better-resourced, larger NGOs) did not experience these barriers in a significant way. As a result, it would benefit future research to attempt to more closely understand the experiences of those organisations who experience these barriers. As outlined above, whilst some organisations' attendance data was lacking due to the varying factors discussed, the very same data was being utilised to a greater potential by other organisations. These organisations, in fact, were reportedly able to leverage this data to further their organisational objectives through legitimacy-building, resource management and other data-driven activities.

Another crucial limitation of this research was the lack of exploration of a wider variety of information sources. Firstly, an examination of NPOs documentation surrounding attendance data would have been useful to assess a disparity between stated objectives and actual outcomes. Further, engagement with representatives of funding bodies will be crucial for any further research into NPO management and utilisation of attendance data. This research provides a valuable insight into the self-reported experiences of NPO staff, but would be more well-rounded with the perspectives of wider cross-section of concerned stakeholders taken into account during sampling. Further research would also ideally include an examination of funding documents such as grant applications, and mid- and end-line reporting to funders, with a particular focus on the prevalence of, and narrative surrounding, attendance data in these reports. Also relevant to this study would be an examination of employee job

descriptions and other internal management documentation, to understand better the technical relationships between various staff and data management duties.

Further study should be conducted on the impact of digital attendance tracking platforms on the ability of NPOs in South Africa, and internationally, to meet both their reporting requirements, and their obligations to beneficiaries and other stakeholders as laid out in their mission. It was clear within the context of this research that these platforms greatly benefited organisations who were able to implement their use, and their proliferation throughout the sector could represent a benefit to organisations.

## 7.9. PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Existing as this research does at the nexus of academia and practice, the practical recommendations for NPOs and funders are arguably just as important as the recommendations for further research. Given the findings of this research, my primary recommendations would be directed at funders. Firstly, as has been recommended in a wide range of research already (Ortiz 2001; Goggins Gregory and Howard 2009; Boyes Watson and Bortcosh 2022), funders must do away with the widespread and ill-advised use of administrative cost ratios as a proxy for NPO “efficiency”. As stated by Boyes Watson and Bortcosh (2022:6): “Given the unequal power dynamic, it is funders that most need to change their practices ... The inequality of the power dynamic is likely to be increased by the reliance that most participating NGOs have on relatively few funders for a large proportion of their income. This places a greater responsibility on funders to use their relative power to shift towards more equitable funding practices.” The imposition of these ratios has a direct and deleterious impact upon organisations’ abilities to make use of the benefits afforded by attendance data, which is heavily dependent on “core” funding.

Further, funders should explore the addition of attendance tracking capacity-building into any grant where attendance is a relevant data point. As discussed above, the use of digital data capture can greatly alleviate the barriers to organisations effectively managing their attendance data, and the coverage of these costs in grants would benefit organisations in their internal capacity building as well as their external accountability and reporting. To reduce NPO workload, funders could provide paid-up access to attendance tracking platforms as part of any grant where the data is relevant. This reduces the administrative burden on already-stretched NPO staff, and reduces the chance of wastage. As stated by Fiester et al (2005:103) “Invest too little in data collection, and the effort will not produce the information needed for accountability reports or programme improvement. Invest too much, and scarce resources may be wasted.” Further to this, large-scale funders could invest in training for the organisations they support in how to “get the most” out of the attendance data they collect. This would help to further a sector-wide understanding of a crucial but under-appreciated data point. This could also take the form of communities of practice (CoP), such as those already being run by grant-maker and capacity support service provider, The Learning Trust (The Learning Trust 2022). These communities of practice allow well-resourced and less well-resourced organisations to come together and share challenges and learnings around certain topics. I was fortunate enough to be invited to speak at a recent CoP about attendance data collection, and the sharing between organisations proved to be of value to a number of the organisations involved.



## 8. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the broader body of knowledge surrounding the collection, collation and use of attendance data by NPOs, with a particular focus on the barriers to the above experienced by organisations in the Cape Town area. The study used a case study design to focus on a small number of socioeconomically diverse organisations. The central research question sought to ascertain the barriers that these organisations face in using attendance data in their monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment activities. This question was broken down into the four following sub-questions:

1. *“Do barriers relating to human and financial capacity impact the usage of attendance data?”*
2. *“Do barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data exist at the level of data collection (fieldworkers)?”*
3. *“Do barriers to the effective utilisation of attendance data exist at the level of data collation, analysis and reporting (M+E departments)?”*
4. *“Does NPO positionality in relation to their target community, or in relation to funders, impact understandings of, and perspectives on, M+E and attendance data?”*

Accurate, rich, and timeously collected attendance data can afford a number of benefits to NPOs which do not necessarily relate directly to funding streams. Firstly, programme decisions relating to resource allocation can be made with more confidence and with less time and human capacity wasted. By way of example, if an organisation provides a meal to each beneficiary at each session, an accurate and up-to-date record of recent attendance can help to plan future food orders. Equally, if an organisation is able to concretely identify drops in attendance around weekends, they can decide to shift programming into the week to more efficiently meet the needs of their beneficiaries. Secondly, as outlined in this thesis' introduction, rich attendance datasets are imperative if meaningful impact evaluation is to be undertaken. For an organisation or secondary researchers to meaningfully assess the efficacy of a programme where beneficiary attendance is relevant, a detailed, longitudinal log of beneficiary

attendance must be maintained. Without a knowledge of the *amount* of an intervention each beneficiary received, outcomes data in the form of pre-, midline and post-testing are functionally useless for the purposes of impact and programme efficacy assessment. Thirdly, detailed attendance data is an important aspect of a well-rounded safeguarding plan for any organisation where beneficiaries spend time in the care of that organisation.

As outlined above, properly managed attendance data can afford a range of benefits to organisations and their beneficiaries. However, this research tentatively suggests that without funder-borne motivation to collect attendance data, this invaluable resource frequently goes under-utilised. Respondents frequently cited funder requests as the primary driving force behind the collection of attendance data, including the types of data collected (absolute/duration/intensity), and the methods by which they are managed. Within the data gathered during this research, a pattern was identified whereby organisations with high levels of legitimacy and extant capacity (well-funded NGOs) were able to leverage well-managed attendance data to increase commitments from funders, as well as modify funder objectives relating to outputs and outcomes. In these cases, funders would request dense attendance data, thereby compelling the organisation to collect it. One of these organisations was also able to secure funding specifically to aid in the continued and improved tracking of attendance data in their programmes. On the other hand, less well-funded organisations, who may lack the perceived legitimacy of larger organisations in the eyes of funders, are often only required to provide low-density “reach” data to funders, which is of little use in terms of programme decision making, impact assessment and safeguarding. These organisations are trapped on the other side of this cycle, with their limited attendance data limiting perceived legitimacy, and therefore funding. Compounding this factor is the disparity in the quality of M+E training among staff members at each type of organisation. To fully leverage the benefits of attendance datasets, staff must either be well-trained in M+E practices, or have a simple-to-use attendance tracking tool, which are more often than not prohibitively expensive.

Digital attendance tracking platforms represent a major area of opportunity for organisations struggling to effectively manage their attendance data, but are not without their own barriers. Whilst digital literacy is improving in South Africa, there still exists a “digital divide” whereby socio-economically disadvantaged populations have less access to digital hardware, and are less well-trained in its use. The up-front cost of computers and mobile phones, whilst decreasing over time, is still prohibitive for many organisations. Further, enterprise software solutions often come with significant monthly or annual license fees, introducing a potential ‘white elephant’ for smaller organisations who do not have the training to properly extract value from such a system.

To respond directly to the sub-questions to the central research question, barriers to the effective collection, collation and utilisation of attendance data exist at the level of data collection and at the level of data collation and analysis. Significant financial barriers, as well as barriers relating to a lack of training and human capacity, also exist. Each of the above set of barriers is compounded by each other, as well as by an NPO’s positionality in relation to funders. Less well-resourced, community-based organisations have fewer tools and less support to overcome barriers, locking them into a particularly tricky cycle of weak or non-existent attendance data. It is therefore the tentative recommendation of this research that funders are encouraged to make provision for the following:

1. Training for NPOs surrounding M+E processes more generally, specifically attendance data (including associated challenges and benefits)
2. Access to appropriate digital attendance tracking platforms, and training in their use.

As argued earlier in this thesis, due to starkly uneven power dynamics, the onus must rest on funders to shift their expectations and practices, and to facilitate and encourage a shift in the approach to crucial attendance data in the South African NPO sector.

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# APPENDIX 1: THE EVALUATION LADDER

## Evaluation Ladder/Escalera de evaluación

The evaluation ladder breaks down the steps from basic program evaluation to rigorous research, step by step. Each rung of the ladder supports the next consistently building skills and knowledge for all involved and all are valuable. Where data can be published is identified to the left.

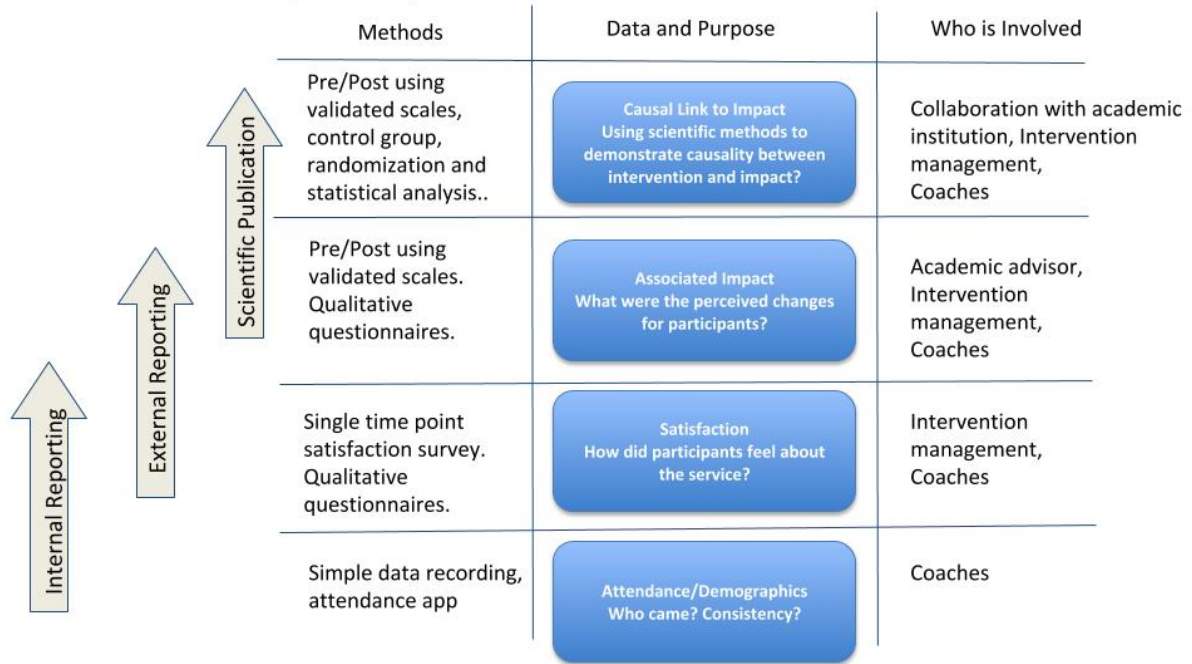


Fig 1. The “Evaluation Ladder” – A tool used internally by Waves for Change to help understand the importance of attendance data. Conceptualised by Dr Jamie Marshall.

## APPENDIX 2: EXAMPLE OF INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEWEES

### Consent Form

**Project Title:** Barriers to effectively using dosage data in Monitoring and Evaluation and Impact Assessment by health development NGOs working with at-risk youth.

**Researcher:** Finlay Kettlewell

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by ... from the University of Cape Town. I understand that this research project is designed to study ...

As a ... at (institution name), I understand that I am being invited to take part in a survey and/or interview. I understand that in agreeing to participate:

- My participation is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation.
- The survey will take approximately xx minutes to complete.
- The interview will last approximately xx minutes. Notes will be written during the interview and/or an audio taped. I can decline to be recorded.
- I understand that if I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview I have the right to decline to answer any question or to leave the interview session.
- I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using the information obtained from the survey or interview. My anonymity as a participant will remain secure. Subsequent uses of recordings and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect anonymity of individuals and institutions.
- Administrative and other teaching staff at (institution name) will neither be present during the interview nor have access to raw notes or transcripts of either the survey or the interview. This precaution will prevent any of the findings having personal negative repercussions for me.
- If I choose to be interviewed, I have the right to view and comment on the transcribed interview data before the findings are analysed.
- I have read and understand the participant information sheet provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
- I have been given a copy of this consent form.

I hereby agree / disagree (circle the applicable option) to participate in the **survey** for this study.

I hereby agree / disagree (circle the applicable option) to participate in the **interview** for this study.

I HEREBY AGREE / DISAGREE (CIRCLE THE APPLICABLE OPTION) TO THE **AUDIO RECORDING OF MY INTERVIEW** FOR THIS STUDY.

## APPENDIX 3: UCT HUMAN PARTICIPANT CHECKLIST

CHECKLIST ITEM	
1)	Have alternatives to face to face options been explored? If No please discuss alternatives with your HOD. If Yes please complete this checklist
2)	H&S Risk Assessment completed to evaluate hazards and risks: a) trip route (travel arrangements across provincial and magisterial districts) b) COVID-19 hotspots c) site to be visited d) tasks to be performed e) policy and procedures in case of damage to property (field workers, internal & external UCT parties), vehicle breakdowns, accidents f) emergency situations such as fires, COVID-19 breakout g) accommodation and related subsistence arrangements h) transport of participants and or staff to facilities
3)	Strategies, plans and precautionary measures put in place and arrangements made: a) Address results/profile of individual team members health risk assessment b) PPE to wear c) Physical and other barriers to put in place d) promotion of ventilation such as natural/fresh air e.g. opening of windows e) Decontamination/cleaning of potentially contaminated site? ( e.g. Wiping surfaces down after each participant?)
4)	Form/record completed by all field workers to include: a) medical aid details (if available) b) medical practitioner's details c) Contact details
5)	Before persons may attend a field trip it is vital they have completed the <a href="#">Personal Health Risk and Medical Vulnerabilities Assessment</a> and may only be allowed to join the field trip if: a) They have received clearance by the Occupational Health Services to return to UCT/Research b) Received a Letter of Authority from the Faculty / Department to return to campus.
6)	Programme/information pack handed out to field workers include info: a) Fieldwork programme: dates/times/time slots b) Trip route c) Route rest stops d) Areas to visit (descriptions of spaces to be accessed, eg building site offices etc) e) Accommodation/dining places names and arrangements f) Name & contact details of H&S persons on trip if applicable: i. first aiders ii. COVID-19 Compliance Officer or SHE Rep g) COVID-19 rules & protocols h) Emergency/incident reporting procedures
7)	Copies of UCT issued fieldwork authorisation letters (as issued by the Faculty Deanery). Original/copy should be with field team members at all times, especially important for areas that might still be off limits if still closed due to lockdown.
8)	Permission evidence/letter (whether on private, parastatal or government sites) obtained from sites where fieldwork is to be conducted.

9)	Evidence/records that field trip training/induction completed by each fieldwork attendee before leaving on trip.
10)	Health & COVID-19 symptom screening procedures in place e.g. completing HigherHealth App every morning - available at <a href="https://healthcheck.higherhealth.ac.za/">https://healthcheck.higherhealth.ac.za/</a>
11)	Procedure to follow (paper exercise) if symptom screening cannot be completed via a cellphone or online.
12)	Reporting procedure of ill health or COVID-19 symptoms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) who to report symptoms to</li> <li>b) procedures to follow if an attendee displays COVID-19 symptoms</li> <li>c) isolating/quarantining area procedures of symptomatic person</li> <li>d) procedures of keeping others safe from infection</li> </ul>
13)	Biological disposal drum/container lined with biohazardous red bag for soiled/contaminated first aid items, masks, gloves, tissue papers.
14)	COVID-19 incident procedures in place: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) reporting procedure on field trip</li> <li>b) ceasing fieldwork</li> <li>c) wearing of surgical/KN95 mask/shields?</li> <li>d) isolation procedures</li> <li>e) isolation area.</li> </ul>
15)	UCT COVID-19 reporting contact details – for staff as well as students.
16)	Local/nearest clinic/hospital or medical practitioner's contact details and/or location/s at all the field trip's stops
17)	Contact details of local emergency services – ambulance, fire brigade, police
18)	Procedure how injured, ill, COVID-19 + person/s to be transported to clinic, hospital, back to campus.
19)	COVID-19 procedures for other fieldwork team members to follow after incident (high or low risk incident).
20)	Field trip incident investigation procedure: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) access to HS02 forms</li> <li>b) completion procedure</li> <li>c) keeping of record</li> <li>d) to whom at UCT to send it to.</li> </ul>
21)	Procedure in place to log of each day's activities e.g. to be recorded in a shared folder such as google or dropbox. The log to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) places visited</li> <li>b) persons closely or at length interacted with external to UCT members on trip</li> <li>c) locations samples taken</li> <li>d) public or private venues accessed or visited</li> <li>e) personnel at venue that were in attendance</li> <li>f) any operation anomalies that may have occurred requiring assistance from persons outside the field crew (e.g. vehicle problems).</li> </ul>
22)	Social and physical distancing as well as de-densifying plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) dividing into smaller field teams - no more than 2 - 4 members</li> <li>b) teams to work separate from one another</li> <li>c) minimising staff/students on-site by using rotation/shift work</li> <li>d) only 2 persons per vehicle with FCMs on at all times</li> <li>e) only one person per room</li> <li>f) 2m distancing kept between field workers/teams, community, shop or site members/staff etc).</li> </ul>
23)	COVID-19 etiquette and rules set up for field trip and an induction completed:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) wearing of face cloth masks (FCMs)</li> <li>b) social distancing</li> <li>c) use of physical barriers</li> <li>d) reporting of COVID-19 symptoms</li> <li>e) persons per vehicle</li> <li>f) promotion of ventilation in vehicles, rooms</li> <li>g) protocol to use toilets/bathrooms procedures (on and off site)</li> <li>h) hand washing and sanitising procedures</li> <li>i) disinfecting procedures (how frequent, when and what)</li> <li>j) how, when to dispose of biological &amp; cleaning/disinfecting waste</li> <li>k) doffing &amp; donning of FCMs</li> <li>l) donning &amp; doffing of face shields and when to wear these - e.g. together with FCM when need to be in close contact for &gt;15min; &lt;1m</li> <li>m) cleaning or disinfecting of PPE</li> <li>n) rules of engagement and interactions with society - purchase of food supplies and fuel</li> <li>o) minimise interactions with local individuals/community members.</li> <li>p) <b>No sharing of food, water bottles and any eating or drinking utensils</b></li> </ul>
24)	Procedures and resources for promotion of personal hygiene (ensure adequate soap, water, sanitizer and wipes for hand sanitising, toilet paper).
25)	Protocol for enhanced cleaning/disinfection of shared bathrooms, kitchen facilities, or equipment
26)	Disposal procedures of general, chemical and biological waste.
27)	Procedure/protocol of when and how must fieldwork equipment be used, disinfected and stored.
28)	Water/liquids and food - each member to bring enough for themselves on trip and/or to site. Clearly labelled bottles and containers – prepared and brought from home if possible.
29)	Extra water resources provided/planned by field trip organisers.