

## “Inventory management: That’s not something you can call science!”

By the INSEAD Humanitarian Research Group

Many health facilities in low- and middle-income countries are still struggling with inventory management for essential medicines, which limits their availability. This is clearly harmful for both patients and facilities. Further, it poses a great barrier to reaching the UN Sustainable Development Goal of safeguarding “*access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all*”. INSEAD Humanitarian Research Group (HRG) is collaborating with PharmAccess Foundation and the University of Nairobi to investigate what is hindering effective inventory management in private health facilities in Nairobi, Kenya.

In November 2018, HRG researcher Sarah Dewilde joined two researchers from the University of Nairobi to roam the fascinating roads of Nairobi County. They visited and interviewed 39 low-income, private health facilities in slum areas. Over the course of three weeks and more than 3000 minutes of interviews, they dove into the complex and multi-faceted problem of over- and understocking of essential medicines.

A previous study in 2016 on the same health facilities gathered 8 weeks of data on inventory control. This revealed substantial over- and understocking problems and hypotheses about their root causes. In 2018, the aim was to get the story behind the data by assessing these hypotheses through in-depth interviews with the facilities’ inventory managers. Each interview was a new journey along many whys and hows, frequently hindered by a lack of stock management knowledge and the absence of record keeping mechanisms. The researchers tried to uncover decision-making heuristics applied by interviewees and to map how they deal with systems (IT or manual). Incentives, skills, priorities, budgetary problems, supplier issues, and their impact on stock management were mapped for a clearer picture of the problem. The insights they gathered will be crucial to tailor solutions – e.g. policies at regulatory level, inventory control systems, and training modules – that will improve access to affordable quality drugs.



It is hard to overestimate the value of spending time in the field. Not only does it provide access to first-hand information, it also enables researchers to see and feel the bigger picture. The moments where you find yourself looking at how bin cards are filled out or order lists are scribbled on the back of an envelope, the look they give you when you try to grasp the reasoning behind their reorder levels and order sizes, and quotes such as “Inventory management: That’s not something you can call science!” or “Forecasting: That is impossible!”.... all of this makes you realize that nothing is obvious. It is safe to say

that being on the road with local partners is a valuable learning experience on both a professional and personal level for our researcher. HRG will use the interview data in a collaborative research effort with University of Nairobi and PharmAccess Foundation to design better ways to manage health facilities and improve access to essential medicines.