The past five years have yielded success in efforts to galvanize renewed support for family planning on the policy agendas of sub-Saharan African countries. Not only is family planning increasingly recognized as a priority investment by public and private international donors, but many governments have made commitments to increasing access to family planning. Holding governments accountable for these commitments and translating this momentum into policy and program changes that improve people’s lives depend on effective, sustained advocacy at the national and subnational levels.

Activities
In Malawi and Kenya, the Population Reference Bureau’s (PRB) IDEA Project partnered with key local organizations to strengthen their institutional capacity to mobilize political support and resources for expanding and improving family planning services and policies.

IDEA ensured that messages were country specific to resonate with a variety of local stakeholders and foster dialogue. Country activities focused on communicating evidence and information about the role of family planning in achieving health and development objectives; nurturing family planning champions through capacity-building workshops; establishing and supporting policy communities of national experts and multisectoral leaders; and focusing attention on issues through a sustained series of national advocacy events to promote public discussion. This approach, designed to raise the profile of family planning on national agendas, has stimulated spirited debates on the links among family planning, women’s health, and poverty reduction, leading to actions that increase political commitment and financial resources.

IDEA has supported government ministries and local organizations in Kenya and Malawi to engage high-level stakeholders in the development, review, and passage of new population policies, and to build support for family planning among various local officials and stakeholders. IDEA worked with partners to raise the profile of population and family planning issues through national conferences, and sustained attention on these issues through evidence-based materials and policy dialogue events with district and county leaders. IDEA has fostered champions who are now leading advocacy efforts in these countries.

Results
IDEA promotes family planning investments as cost effective and high impact. At the Leaders’ Conference for Population and Development in Kenya in 2010 and in Malawi in 2012, PRB’s multimedia ENGAGE presentations were shown as the keynote addresses and emphasized the message “family planning is a best buy.” This message was incorporated into the conference resolutions, plans of action, and reports disseminated widely throughout both countries in preparation for their participation in Family Planning 2020 (FP2020), the 2012 global summit in London. These conferences and the decisions made at them have helped leaders from diverse sectors in both countries affirm the central importance of family planning to national development.

Parliaments in Kenya and Malawi pass population policies. With IDEA’s help, Kenya’s National Council for Population and Development (NCPD) successfully made the case for a new national population policy that will guide population and family planning activities in the country until 2050 (replacing the previous policy that expired in 2010). Earlier attempts to pass a new population policy failed, but with IDEA support, NCPD expanded their policy dialogue with stakeholders, holding events throughout the country and developing and distributing a range of policy briefs, data sheets, and multimedia presentations. The policy, which relies
on a multisectoral approach to voluntary family planning, was successfully passed in 2012 and earned the Kenyan government the Aspen Institute’s prestigious 2013 RESOLVE Award, honoring nations for expanding access to reproductive health.

In Malawi, IDEA developed advocacy materials in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development (MEPD) and the Ministry of Health to reposition family planning as a key strategy for promoting sustainable development and addressing the pace of population growth. In advance of the launch and dissemination of the country’s new national population policy, IDEA developed and produced a television program on Malawi’s population and development challenges, which aired widely and engaged high-level leaders in public discussion of the importance of family planning for national development. Malawi received a 2012 RESOLVE Award for increasing access to reproductive health services. At the ceremony, Malawi’s Principal Secretary of Health Dr. Charles Mwansambo emphasized the government’s expanded view of family planning “not only as a health issue but as a development issue.”

Advocacy initiatives advance youth sexual and reproductive health. IDEA partnered with MEPD and the Family Planning Association of Malawi (FPAM) to develop and disseminate the PRB ENGAGE multimedia presentation, “Malawi: Investing in Our Future Now” across 22 of Malawi’s 28 districts. The presentation has been widely used by family planning advocates to communicate the lifesaving benefits of family planning and its links to sustainable development. The presentation contributed to policy change in many communities, yielding new by-laws to improve girls’ education, reduce child marriage, and unplanned pregnancies; and prompting calls from traditional leaders for local health providers to expand family planning services. This community engagement was also instrumental in generating stakeholder support for Malawi to pass a law banning child marriage and raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 in 2015, meeting their FP2020 pledge.

Fostering a participatory process for policy change. In Kenya, IDEA created the Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health Civil Society Organization Coalition in 2011 and strengthened the capacity of Coalition members to influence the revision of Kenya’s Adolescent Reproductive Health and Development Policy (ARHD). A 2012 IDEA assessment of the ARHD policy identified ways to strengthen its implementation, such as plans for mobilizing resources and establishing clear roles for government agencies and other groups. With IDEA support the Coalition shared input on strengthening the ARHD policy with the Kenya Ministry of Health committee responsible for revising it. As a result, the revised policy (to be finalized later in 2015) directly reflects ideas shared by Coalition members and fully addresses the most pressing sexual and reproductive health needs of Kenya’s young people. Revisions include special attention to vulnerable and/or marginalized adolescents (such as those living in slums, or living with HIV or disabilities); age-appropriate, comprehensive sexuality education; and minimum standards for youth-friendly services.

Lessons Learned and Looking Forward
Concerted national and subnational advocacy efforts are critical. Family planning advocates cannot depend on the momentum from international initiatives such as FP2020 alone to generate change at the local level.

Concise, nontechnical information empowers leaders and decisionmakers. Stakeholders from a wide array of sectors at both local and national levels are able to effectively communicate family planning’s benefits and role in advancing development in their country or community. Nontechnical materials help them address questions frequently raised by various stakeholders such as religious leaders and can even help create new champions among these sectors.

Multisectoral advocacy is key to changing national policies. A groundswell of advocacy coming from government, NGOs, donors, traditional leaders, and civil society leaders outside of the health community can contribute to policy change, the expansion of family planning initiatives, and improved reproductive health.

Strengthening institutional advocacy capacities is an ongoing need. While governments make commitments to improve family programs, action can flounder when institutions and advocates lack the skills to hold decisionmakers accountable. Strengthening the advocacy skills of local decisionmakers and organizations in the public and private sectors, including civil society, is essential to successful advocacy.

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