Many researchers aspire to influence policies and programs but lack the necessary strategies and skills to reach decisionmakers with their research findings. To overcome this research-to-policy gap, the Population Reference Bureau’s (PRB) Policy Communication Fellows Program strengthens the capacity of young developing-country researchers to influence policies for lasting change.

Now entering its 28th year, the program empowers doctoral students from USAID-priority countries with the skills to translate their research into clear and actionable messages for policy audiences. With these skills, Policy Fellows can become the next generation of leaders shaping policy in their countries. Over the life of the program, PRB has trained nearly 400 researchers (71 during the IDEA Project) from countries around the world through this annual fellowship.

Activities

Under the IDEA Project, the core tenets of the Policy Communication Fellows Program remained the same, while the program evolved with exciting innovations. In order to develop skills communicating with policymakers and decisionmakers, the program includes a two-week skills-building workshop, a year of mentorship with senior PRB staff, and interaction with research-to-policy experts in Washington, culminating with a policy-focused presentation. As communication platforms are constantly evolving, Fellows now build skills in communicating their findings and recommendations via new web-based media, including writing articles for publication on PRB’s website, tailoring messages for social media, and delivering “60-second soundbites” on camera. Each of these program components strengthens their capacity to communicate key messages quickly and compellingly. Working with electronic platforms and new media teaches participants how to expand the reach of their findings, ensuring that policy-relevant results can be shared more broadly than just through scholarly journals.

Results

Many of IDEA’s Policy Communication Fellows have become leaders around the world and report that the policy communication skills learned through the fellowship have been invaluable in their work in academia, government, civil society, and in bilateral and donor organizations—such as the UNFPA, the World Bank, the UNICEF Middle East and North Africa regional office, CARE Cambodia, and University of Pretoria. Alumni regularly use their policy communication skills to influence health and population policies in their countries and around the world. They frequently speak with and present to policy audiences, including Ministries of Health, Population, and Finance; National Family Planning Councils; and economic and health-focused research centers. Through these venues, alumni from all 28 years of the program have informed policies such as national reproductive health strategic plans and national social protection policies.

Policy messages influence the president of Ghana. Policy Communication Fellow Evelyn Sakeah, Ph.D., trained under IDEA, developed a web article summarizing her dissertation research evaluating a pilot program to train community nurses as midwives to improve maternal health. She shared the web article with her supervisors at the Ghana Health Service, who shared it with Ghana’s current president. When the European Union granted Ghana 52 million euros to address maternal mortality, the president acted on Sakeah’s recommendations and allocated funding to train more midwives. The Ministry of Finance commissioned her to submit a proposal for the national budget to begin scaling up midwifery training. She continues to apply her policy communication skills as she presents this proposal to stakeholders within various ministries and around the country.

About the IDEA Project

With funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development, IDEA—Informing Decisionmakers to Act—increases support among policy audiences for effective health and population programs around the world. By increasing the flow of accurate, understandable information about population, family planning, and reproductive health to policy audiences, IDEA enhances efforts carried out by civil society, the public sector, the development community, and donors. IDEA develops materials on priority issues in cutting-edge formats; trains and supports media to influence policy change; builds the communications capacity of institutions, researchers, and advocates; and nurtures communities of policy champions.
Policy Fellows alumni emerge as leaders in research and policy communications. Over the course of the IDEA project, they have presented research on reproductive health and family planning before international audiences at the International Conferences on Family Planning, the 24th Summit of the African Union in 2014, and other global meetings. Within their own countries, alumni are frequently asked to speak to policy audiences because of their communication skills. By staying in contact with alumni from all 28 years of the program, PRB has documented the program’s long-term impacts as young researchers transition to respected experts in national and global policy dialogue.

Former Fellow Eliya Zulu founded the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) with a mission to bridge the gap between research, policy, and practice. Zulu has become a globally recognized expert on issues of population and development policy, speaking frequently before heads of state, donors, and national policymakers about the investments necessary for a demographic dividend. Joseph de Graft-Johnson, a participant 25 years ago, has used his position as an expert on maternal and neonatal health to influence national policies on infant care throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

Translating research for policy becomes an essential job skill. As a health specialist at the World Bank Group, Rifat Hasan, Ph.D., has many opportunities to use the skills she learned from the Policy Communication Fellows Program. “I frequently find myself writing policy papers, developing presentations, and delivering presentations. The PRB training was incredibly valuable with respect to all three. Being able to take complicated issues and write a note that a nonexpert can understand is important in trying to influence decisionmaking,” reports Hasan. “In my career, I often play the role of translating existing research findings into policy messages and recommendations for decisionmakers.”

Lessons Learned and Looking Forward

Teaching researchers to influence policies requires a strategic effort to strengthen communication skills. Through academic training, Policy Fellows focus on research methodology and communicating their expertise within their discipline, but are rarely taught to communicate with nontechnical audiences. An intentional effort to learn the skills necessary to translate specialized knowledge for policy audiences helps Fellows bridge this gap so that as future leaders they are equipped to inform change outside of academia.