



Family Planning Implementation Research Donor Meeting
December 3–4, 2012

Launching collaboration on family planning research among the international donor community

In support of the commitments made at the London Family Planning Summit, the first Family Planning Implementation Research Donor Meeting was held in Washington, DC, on December 3–4, 2012.

At this meeting, a group of bilateral, multilateral and private foundation donors identified a set of research gaps that could best be addressed through collective action and outlined initial strategies for doing so. Issues addressed in depth included:

- Scaling up best practices
- Adolescents and gender
- New measures and research methodologies
- Financing mechanisms for family planning
- Advocacy, accountability and policy

This meeting represents the emergence of greater donor collaboration on family planning implementation research, and the recognition that many of the remaining questions in the field call for aligned responses that draw on the comparative advantages of a range of development partners. It is seen as the beginning of an ongoing process to harmonize donor-supported research on family planning.

On July 11, 2012, the international community redoubled its commitment to voluntary family planning services in the world's poorest countries, united by the goal of making contraceptive information, services and supplies available to an additional 120 million women and girls by the year 2020. The monumental London Summit on Family Planning, co-hosted by the UK Government's Department for International Development and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, generated important commitments from world leaders, donor agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In one day, US \$2.6 billion were committed in support of this goal by organizations and governments based in the industrialized world, sparking a new global movement dedicated to increasing women's access to family planning. In the months following the London Summit, these donors have undertaken aggressive efforts to begin delivering on the ambitious commitments made in London under the aegis of the Family Planning 2020 movement (FP2020).¹

A fundamental premise of the London Summit was that "business as usual" is not sufficient to meet the world's ever-increasing need for family planning products and services. It also demonstrated that collective action and policy alignment, especially among key donors, is a highly effective tool for bringing about change. Drawing on these lessons, a core group of donors recognized that many of the remaining research questions on family planning program implementation required a new and similarly collaborative approach.

1. <http://www.londonfamilyplanningsummit.co.uk/fp2020more.php>

As part of their partnership under the Alliance for Reproductive, Maternal and Newborn Health (RMNH Alliance), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID), Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation joined with the World Health Organization (WHO) to plan and host a multi-donor meeting on family planning research. They agreed that the meeting should be focused on initiating a broader, ongoing collaboration among donors in order to strengthen the knowledge base needed to achieve the goals of the FP2020 movement. This group also agreed that it was necessary to convene a donor-only gathering, one that would allow participants the ability to identify synergies on both current and planned procurements.

In support of this effort, over 40 representatives from 21 funding agencies met to discuss key knowledge gaps on family planning—service provision, scale-up and sustainability. Together, this group of bilateral, multilateral and private foundation donors collectively identified a set of research gaps that could best be addressed through collective action and outlined initial strategies for doing so.

This report provides a brief overview of the proceedings of this first Family Planning Implementation Research Donor Meeting, held in Washington, DC on December 3–4, 2012.

Setting the context: Reviewing the family planning research landscape

The term “family planning research” was defined broadly for this meeting, including a wide range of implementation research topics and methodologies. Biomedical and contraceptive technology-related research was explicitly not addressed in these discussions, as it is the subject of another highly effective donor collaboration process. Participants from USAID and WHO briefed the group on this collaboration, undertaken under the aegis of the Contraceptive Technology/Dual Protection Donor Working Group (CT-DWG), which has allowed donors to harmonize their investments in the long, and often costly, process of developing new contraceptive methods. Presentations also reviewed key prioritization and landscaping exercises that served as a basis for identifying collective research priorities.

WHO prioritization exercises

WHO presented the results of two global research priority-setting exercises, one on family planning and another on adolescent reproductive and sexual health (ARSH). Both exercises used a process developed by the Child Health

and Nutrition Research Initiative (CHNRI), ranking research topics. For the family planning research prioritization, the survey found a high degree of consensus around the need for research to address unmet need, including strategies for integrating family planning with other services, reaching underserved populations and undertaking implementation research to improve the quality of family planning-service delivery.²

Priority setting on ARSH research resulted in a high degree of consensus on the most important research questions, the breadth of which reflect the variability in the needs of adolescents, as well as the diversity of contexts in which they live. Importantly, many of the highly-ranked questions reflect a movement in the field away from establishing prevalence of health issues among this population towards the scaling-up of existing interventions and development of new interventions.³

Assessing the evidence base: Critical issues and gaps

The Population Council was asked to prepare a background paper for the meeting that reviewed and synthesized the large body of existing family planning research, and identified a set of key knowledge gaps in family planning research. These gaps were used as a departure point for subsequent group discussions.

This synthesis reviewed both proximate and distal factors that contribute to the complex outcome of reducing unintended pregnancy. Given the goals and intentions of FP2020, the review also adopted an equity lens, looking specifically at the extent to which the needs of those most disadvantaged have been addressed in family planning programs, and successful strategies for reducing inequities and assuring reproductive rights. The full discussion of each of these elements can be found in the meeting background paper.⁴

The paper included a snapshot of current and planned donor investments on family planning research in an attempt to identify potential synergies. Although this analysis was limited by incomplete data and the use of

2. Moazzam Ali, Armando Seuc, Asma Rahimi, Mario Festin, Marleen Temmerman. “Reducing unmet need for family planning: Results of a global research priority setting exercise.” 2013 (submitted for publication).

3. Hindin, Michelle J, Charlotte Sigurdson Christiansen, B Jane Ferguson. 2013. “Setting research priorities for adolescent sexual and reproductive health in low- and middle-income countries.” *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 91:1. Geneva: WHO. <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/91/1/12-107565/en/index.html>.

4. Askew, Ian, and Martha Brady. 2013. “Reviewing the evidence and identifying gaps in family planning research: The unfinished agenda to meet FP2020 goals,” background document for the Family Planning Research Donor Meeting, Washington, DC, 3–4 December 2012. New York: Population Council.

different definitions to characterize various aspects of implementation research, it found several notable trends among those who supplied information. For example, the geographic focus for most of the participating donors is on sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, with relatively limited research being done in Francophone West Africa. Common research issues addressed by several donors include: adolescent/youth programming; integration of family planning services with other health services; health systems; and community-based approaches. All the bilateral donors provide support to WHO, particularly the work of the Special Programme of Research, Development, and Research Training in Human Reproduction.

The Population Council also provided an overview of different levels of evidence available for decision-making and identified a set of considerations on determining the appropriate standard of evidence for future procurements

Evidence gaps: Areas for research investment

Approaches to determining inequities and identifying needs of underserved and vulnerable populations

Methodologies to prospectively evaluate structural interventions to reduce inequities and vulnerability

Interventions to meet the needs of unmarried and married adolescents

Interventions to improve and sustain the quality of FP services

Strategies for scaling up effective models of integrated services

Strategies for reaching rural communities

Strategies for reaching urban poor populations

Techniques for defining and shaping contraceptive markets to improve availability and access

Innovative financing mechanisms to expand access and increase affordability

Strategies for advocacy and accountability

Understanding the dynamics of contraceptive decision-making and use

Building capacity and improving methods to generate and use evidence on FP

and data utilization efforts. They highlighted the diversity of approaches used by donors to evaluate quality of evidence, recognizing that these approaches use varying standards and sources of information to determine “best practices.” To generate evidence that can lead to confident decisions, they emphasized the importance of investing in research that employs the most rigorous design possible; can collect robust data; builds capacity of human resources to undertake high quality research, and builds the skills of decision-makers for understanding and using evidence.

Focused discussions on research gaps

The Population Council evidence review produced a list of twelve key research gaps (see box), five of which were selected by participants for in-depth discussion. These topics reflect both shared priority areas across the donor agencies represented, and the recognition that such broad gaps require collective efforts among the donor community to adequately address. Participants divided into self-selected small groups around the five selected topics. Each group identified key questions, gaps and opportunities related to that topic, and developed concrete action steps for furthering collaboration.

Though the five discussion groups represented different technical areas, participants recognized that there are many opportunities for coordination and collaboration beyond and across the five specific topics. Additionally, a number of common issues were identified across the groups:

- Issues of scale-up, new measures and adolescents are cross-cutting and should be considered as part of all discussions on addressing research gaps.
- To guide the next steps, participants felt it important to have a more refined and complete analysis of the evidence in each of their topic areas, and a more comprehensive landscaping of current and planned donor activities to address the topics.
- Published research favors successes, while much can be learned from failures; participants felt it important to explore avenues to better document and share lessons from what does not work, as well as from what works.

Scaling up best practices

Participants identified many “best practices” that are or could be taken to scale, but acknowledged that a gap still remained in consolidating and using existing evidence to plan, implement and support sustainable scale-up. Group members identified a set of potential activities for future collaboration: conducting situational analyses of current

scale-up efforts to identify lessons learned from current and retrospective, qualitative and quantitative data; funding prospective or long term research on the process and effect of scaling up a particular practice or “package” of practices, and/or conducting a systematic review and analysis of resources and experience on scaling-up.

They felt it was important to facilitate a process by which donors are better able to identify and take advantage of opportunities for multi-donor support of research on scaling-up evidence-based practices.

“Connections are critical at these meetings... I will be a champion of collaborative work that has been identified here.”

—MEETING PARTICIPANT

Adolescents and gender

Given the FP2020 goal to increase new contraceptive users by 120 million, this group emphasized the importance of research to identify effective and efficient methods of reaching adolescents to achieve this goal. The discussion focused on research issues related to adolescent girls, and on influencing gender dynamics among boys, girls and the societies in which they live. In addition to research priorities identified by the WHO prioritization on ARSH, the group also identified the need for additional data on the cost and the effectiveness of interventions, including the scale-up of interventions targeted to specific groups of adolescents. Participants agreed that further analyses are needed to describe the significant impact that reaching this population would have in order to build the “business case” for investing in adolescent programming.

New measures and research methodologies

Access to reliable, up-to-date information on current and planned research investments was seen as essential for making progress on all of the shared priorities identified in the meeting. To this end, participants resoundingly called for efforts to improve cross-donor knowledge management. Examples of information to be shared might include tools, study designs and methodologies, and data sets, as well

as updates on donor support to research. In addition, the group affirmed the importance of maintaining consistently high-quality research through the application of common standards for the appropriate use of measures and research methods. They recognized the need to develop common principles to guide evidence reviews and harmonize the identification of “best practices.” They called for a set of activities to develop standard measures and validate existing measures, in order to improve efforts to capture program experience and lessons learned across donor-supported efforts. The group stressed the need to build the capacity of researchers across the world to best utilize social science research methods and tools in specific areas of research, and to develop common metrics for evaluating the impact of capacity-building efforts.

Financing mechanisms for family planning

Participants recognized that although there are different modalities in health care financing, such as user fees, voucher schemes, performance-based financing and cash transfers, in addition to direct government support, there is a dearth of information regarding how these affect and are used for family planning. The group suggested the following strategies to improve the evidence base related to financing innovations: 1) identify gaps in family planning-related evidence in financing mechanisms through a systematic approach such as the CHNRI process; and 2) as projects are designed and undertaken, develop and implement plans for rigorous research, using randomized controlled trials or quasi-experimental designs, to assess the family planning financing components.

Advocacy, accountability and policy

This group recognized the necessity of more specific evidence that reflects the context of various policymakers, as well as the need for more compelling evidence on the effectiveness of advocacy investments and strategies. They recognized the need to harmonize donor approaches to accountability by developing a common approach and framework for monitoring accountability. They proposed to develop an inventory of national policies, laws and legislation in the FP2020 priority countries, to be used to inform policy analysis and modifications; and an inventory of advocacy approaches and measures, along with available studies that assess their effectiveness and cost. All of these activities would be conducted in close collaboration with the Performance monitoring and accountability work stream of FP2020 to identify further opportunities for donor coordination on family planning research related to advocacy and accountability.

Continuing the momentum

To further the process set in motion by the meeting, participants agreed to continue convening regularly to refine and implement their action plans. Participants requested that the RMNH Alliance convene these calls, with the expectation that group members will actively participate in carrying out the identified activities. There was general agreement that representation to the meeting was limited and that invitations to participate in follow-up activities should be extended to other donors that were not able to attend the meeting, as well as other colleagues within their own organizations. Importantly, the group recognized the need for formal linkages with the emerging FP2020 architecture so that its outcomes can directly support these important global efforts. In the longer term, the group recognized the value of convening again as a collective to review and move forward progress made in the small groups.

Participants widely agreed that the meeting was useful and that these initial discussions should be continued and expanded. Overall, the meeting participants were grateful for the opportunity to exchange information and ideas, and for the opportunity to learn about their colleagues' family planning research activities. They agreed that a realistic attempt to move forward the plans outlined during the meeting would be worthwhile, while at the same time recognizing that the process is likely to develop incrementally over the long term.

For more information

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