



Developing Malawi's YFHS Strategy: Involving Youth and Multisectoral Stakeholders

BACKGROUND

In March 2007, the Ministry of Health (MOH) launched the National Standards on Youth Friendly Health Services to develop a supportive environment for the delivery of high-quality youth-friendly health services (YFHS). The standards were put in place to ensure all health services are acceptable, accessible, and affordable to all young people. However, a 2013/14 evaluation of YFHS throughout Malawi indicated medium to low implementation of the standards and only 13 percent of youth reporting to have ever used the services.

DEVELOPING A YFHS STRATEGY

In 2014–15, Malawi undertook, for the first time, a multisectoral participatory approach to develop a YFHS program strategy. It closely engaged key stakeholders, including young people themselves. The consultative process was evidence-based, and responded to gaps identified by the 2013/14 YFHS evaluation. Numerous national and regional stakeholder meetings generated demand and support for the development of a costed five-year YFHS strategy to address youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (YSRHR) needs. The strategy process was led by the MOH-Reproductive Health Directorate (MOH-RHD) with technical assistance and support from the USAID-funded Health Policy Project.

EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH

The 2013/14 national YFHS program evaluation undertaken by MOH-RHD, with assistance from the USAID-supported E2A Project, provided up-to-date information on the status of and challenges to YFHS in Malawi. In addition, HPP mapped YSRHR programs in the country to outline coverage versus needs on the ground. HPP also conducted an extensive literature review to provide an overview of the policy environment, identify and prioritize stakeholders, and highlight areas that have had low investment yet are central to an effective program.

"Consulting us young people means the [YFHS] strategy, once finalized, will represent our ideals and aspirations...but there is need to ensure that these services are provided by young people themselves if the age gap challenge is to be addressed."

Clement Makuwa, Executive Director for Malawi Young Politicians Union

PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

From the onset, the MOH and HPP involved cross-sectoral stakeholders at multiple levels, including

- Linking the YFHS strategy development process to dissemination of the YFHS Program Evaluation Report. The MOH used the evaluation dissemination to get early stakeholders' input on what gaps and opportunities the strategy should address.
- A steering committee of diverse key stakeholders in YSRH—government and nongovernment, private sector, and youth themselves—guided the process. A concerted effort was made to involve actors beyond the usual YFHS partners. Clear terms of reference and a process road map were shared with the committee members for a common understanding of their role and responsibilities.
- Highly participatory, transparent consultations were held with line ministries, development partners/donors, district-level staff, youth organizations, youth, community radio, print media, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and technical working groups.

RESULTS

YFHS stakeholders at the national, regional, and district levels are extremely knowledgeable about YFHS and the challenges they face in Malawi. The regional consultations served a dual purpose of disseminating the YFHS evaluation findings further, and using the findings as a basis for stakeholder review of the draft YFHS strategy. It was also revealed that youth-serving organizations are applying the evaluation findings and their experiences as part of the YFHS Steering Committee to develop interventions on YSRHR.

The cross-sectoral approach has improved dialogue and collaboration to improve comprehensive sexuality education and SRH services for both in- and out-of-school youth. The ministries of Education, Health and Youth committed to improve linkages between schools and health service delivery points, and this process achieved renewed commitment for finalization of the out-of-school Comprehensive Sexuality Education manual and the scale-up of "The World Starts With Me" program in teachers' training and technical colleges.

"...children as young as 10 to 14 years, most of whom are in primary schools, have already started engaging in sexual activities one way or the other but they cannot access sexual reproductive health education or services within the walls of their schools because of lack of a harmonized legal framework. This puts them at risk of early unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. It is our expectation...[the YFHS strategy will provide] an enabling environment for planning, programming and delivery of YFHS information and services to young people at all levels..."

Ellen Dossi, youth representative

- This process has also increased attention to and multisectoral collaboration on key youth-related issues, such as gender-based sexual violence and HIV. For example, the ministries of Gender and Health, and youth community-based organizations committed to support YFHS safe spaces within communities. Likewise the Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, Ministry of Health, and the National Association of Young People Living with HIV have teamed up to advance YPLHIV advocacy activities outlined in the YFHS strategy. workshops, regional consultations, and engagement with the MOH's existing FP and YFHS Sub-Committees.
- In partnership with Population Reference Bureau Malawi, the process linked with ongoing social and behavior change communication activities where youth groups and youth radio reporters were already receiving training to produce youth SRH radio programming. HPP engaged these platforms to serve as input into the strategy development process and raise awareness of the strategy development among communities.

PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS

Malawi's experience with developing a five-year costed YFHS strategy highlights key elements for YSRHR strategy development:

- YSRHR is a multisectoral issue; engagement of several ministries (Gender, Youth, Education, Local Government), local NGOs, and the private sector was critical in developing the strategy and leveraging resources for a sustainable impact. This effort has led line ministries, development partners and local NGOs to understand and acknowledge to their roles in YSRHR in a coordinated manner, leading to strengthened investments and joint programs for YSRHR.
- The use of research findings from the YFHS evaluation and other evidence stimulated support for the strategy beyond the traditional stakeholders engaged in the YFHS program.
- Costing the strategy was important, as it provides a concrete basis for mobilizing specific resources and encouraging the integration of activities.
- Meaningful youth engagement and harnessing of local knowledge are building blocks for designing, planning, and implementation of youth YSRHR programs. Involving young people in the strategy development process strengthened their role as champions for youth access to SRHR information, services, and ultimately for the implementation of the YFHS strategy.
- The use of media, with a focus on local and community radio to gather views of youth and develop community acceptance of YFHS, was a cost-effective and efficient way to stimulate community dialogue on sex and young people, and to engage a large majority of the population on policy issues at the grassroots level.

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