



## Africa Unit

### What Is the Frac?

Family Planning Management Development (FPMD)

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## WHAT IS THE FRAC?

The Francophone Regional Advisory Committee, better known as the FRAC, is a group of senior-level family planning managers and policy makers of public and private sector family health programs representing some 15 Francophone countries in North, West and Central Africa, and Haiti.

Since 1987, this group has met once a year to discuss issues of common interest that relate directly to their task of improving family planning program performance in their respective countries. There are several characteristics of the annual FRAC reunion that set it apart from the many other high-level meetings and conferences that take place throughout the year:

- **The participants in these meetings set the agenda themselves**  
They choose to explore topics that are complex and not well understood, but which influence the directions of their programs, such as integration, community participation, sustainability, quality of care, decentralization, and institutionalization of supervision.
- **The exchanges go in all directions, everyone is a learner and a teacher**  
Managers from countries with more advanced programs do not only bring ideas and advice; they also pick up new ideas from countries with far less

developed family planning programs.

- **The meetings combine theory with an exchange of practical experiences and visits to the field**

The balanced approach of looking at a theoretical conceptual framework within the constraints of the day-to-day realities of the field discourages quick-fixes and integrates what is known with what can be done.

- **The meetings are engaging and require hard work**

Much of the work is done in small groups with everyone sharing responsibility for the outcomes. The field visits take place during three days and require considerable travel, away from the comfortable facilities and roads of the capital city. There are frequent points for groups and individuals to report on what they are learning.

- **The meetings produce tools, instruments and approaches that are ready to be taken elsewhere and tried out**

The documents coming out of the FRAC distinguish themselves from the traditional conference recommendations in that they focus on what the managers themselves CAN do, rather than what governments SHOULD do.

- **Each year participants are introduced to new facilitation methodologies that they can experiment with in their own programs**  
Anecdotal evidence suggests that these new facilitation methodologies are used by managers who have attended the FRAC, and therefore trickle down to the various country programs.
- **At each meeting there is a core of “old-timers,” who have attended a number of previous meetings**  
The core members have forged close relationships with one another, giving the FRAC a sense of community which facilitates informal exchange. At the same time, the participation of new people each year infuses the group with new ideas and perspectives.
- **Family planning managers from both the public and the private sectors attend the meetings**  
At the FRAC meetings dialogues are often initiated between managers working in the public and private sectors of the same country. These dialogues tend to continue after the participants have returned to their countries, facilitating an on-going cooperation between the public and private sectors.

## **WHY THE FRAC?**

The FRAC came into existence in response to a number of questions raised early on during the USAID-funded Family Planning Management Training (FPMT) project. For example:

- How can we break the relative isolation of Francophone family planning managers?
- What are the senior managers most urgent needs in terms of family planning program management?
- How can we promote transfer of learning?
- How can we accelerate innovation?

Out of these questions came the FRAC's purpose:

- To provide top-level managers of family planning programs in Francophone countries with an opportunity to network and exchange experiences.
- To learn first hand about management issues facing these same managers and become familiar with their needs in dealing with these issues.
- To overcome the traditional professional isolation in which many Francophone family planning managers operate.
- To have the FRAC recognized as a resource for family planning management issues.
- To create a network which encourages FRAC members to exchange experiences and

ideas outside the annual meeting format.

## **WHAT DID WE DO?**

### **Under FPMT, three meetings took place:**

The FRAC first began in Boston in 1987. The FRAC members did an inventory of management issues and common problems and participated in a study tour of innovative family planning programs in Jamaica and Mexico.

At the end of the first FRAC meeting members agreed that the question of integration of family planning into other preventive health services was a principal challenge to family planning programs. The second FRAC meeting took place in Morocco in 1988 and focused on the question: To integrate or not to integrate family planning programs in MCH/PHC?

The third FRAC meeting took place in Dakar in 1989 with the specific goal of exploring and identifying the problems and opportunities which exist in the management of community participation in family planning programs.

### **Under the Family Planning Management Development (FPMD) project, four more meetings took place:**

In 1991 participants attended the FRAC IV in Boston, and addressed the topic of quality of care in FP/MCH services. Site visits were made to family planning associations in Washington, DC, New York, and in Burlington, Vermont.

The FRAC V took place in Rwanda in 1992 and focused on decentralization of family planning programs.

In 1993 the FRAC VI met in Tunisia to explore the institutionalization of supervision in family planning programs. A collection of supervision materials used in the various FRAC countries was compiled as a resource for all FRAC participants.

In Guinea in 1994 the FRAC VII addressed the topic of sustainability of family planning programs. This topic was especially relevant, as the end of the FPMD I project marked the end of guaranteed funding for the FRAC. FRAC members decided that the network and its annual meetings were very important and set a goal to develop the FRAC as a sustainable network, which would continue to meet and exchange experiences even when there wasn't one clear source of funding.

With this goal in mind, the FRAC VIII was held in Benin in 1995 on the theme of community participation in family planning programs. In contrast to the seven previous meetings, the FRAC meeting in Benin was no longer supported by the FPMD project. The organization and funding for the FRAC VIII meeting was a collective effort. Organization of the meeting was the responsibility of the Centre for African Family Studies (CAFS) and the IPPF-affiliate in Benin, *L'Association Beninoise pour la Promotion de la Famille* (ABPF). International participants found their own funding to attend the meeting and paid a registration fee; AFRICARE and other NGOs sponsored local participants; and funding for organizational costs was provided by ABPF and the government of Benin with local support from USAID, UNFPA, and UNICEF.

## **HOW ARE THE MEETINGS ORGANIZED?**

All FRAC meetings are highly participative and interactive. They are designed to draw on the expertise and experience of the FRAC members themselves to explore current practice and understanding of the concept under review. Expert opinion, as reflected in the literature, is used to expand the understanding of the concept and make available learning from across the globe, and finally local resources are used to illustrate the practical applications and issues as they arise. The final part of each meeting is dedicated to a reflection on the various perspectives and the implications for each member's own program, culminating in the development of action plans that are aimed at putting into practice the new insights with a view of improving program performance.

## **Where Are We Now?**

As a result of the seven meetings organized under the FPMT and FPMD projects, and the FRAC VIII meeting in Benin, there now exists a support network of about 40 Francophone senior family planning decision-makers from the public and private sector.

This support network manifests itself not only during the annual meetings, which serve to encourage FRAC members to implement and improve family planning programs in their countries under difficult circumstances, but also in between meetings, as FRAC members maintain contact with one another.

The FRAC meetings have also contributed to a better understanding and documentation of current issues and problems with regard to integration, community participation, quality of care, and decentralization as faced by senior family planning officials.

## **SO WHAT?**

Senior level managers are usually engaged in hectic work schedules and have little time to reflect. They are asked to respond quickly to initiatives, ideas, and pressure from above or outside of their organizations. They work in highly politicized environments where advice from peers may not be neutral or objective. Rare are the moments, if any, when they can sit back and reflect on what they are doing, and explore the concepts behind the management initiatives they undertake.

Yet these same senior level managers need to exhibit comprehensive understanding of family planning management and new management initiatives. Where are they supposed to educate themselves on these topics, which, even in the United States, are often not well understood?

Other than the occasional management course, such topics are not explored, and certainly not with peers from other countries who are in similar positions.

Eventually, the introduction of new management practices into family planning programs will radically alter the way that we do business and the way that we manage these programs. There is currently no forum that can provide the necessary help in thinking through the changes and that can influence the knowledge and attitudes required to make the changes happen.

The FRAC is really a leadership forum which is used to gently nudge people in leadership positions into directions that are new and different from the way they currently operate. The methodology used is consistent with the new way of managing that we advocate:

- **Accountability** - you will get out of the FRAC what you put into it, and more
- **Empowerment** - take the control that you have and use it to change things at that level, or use it as a leverage point to make changes happen at other levels
- **Full participation** - everyone is an expert in something, all voices are critical

Interviews held with twelve FRAC participants in Rwanda confirmed that the FRAC was accomplishing its goal: they felt increasingly confident to speak with authority on management issues covered in the meetings, which allowed them to play an important role at the national level in setting directions and managing the national program. They felt better equipped to think through the implications and consequences of introducing new management practices, and they have the support and advice from colleagues all over Francophone Africa. We have learned that the FRAC works as an accelerator in bringing about new initiatives and speeding up implementation of programs.

In 1994, another FRAC evaluation took place. During individual interviews, FRAC participants expressed the strong desire to continue the annual FRAC meetings. It has managed to take Francophone family planning leaders out of their isolation and has forged connections where none existed before. FRAC learning and experiences are being applied in different ways by different people. Some return from a visit with a broader view of the issues and a better view of the larger picture, the issues involved and implications of proposed initiatives or solutions. Others multiply the effects of the FRAC by giving presentations at national workshops or seminars, and sharing their learning with colleagues.<sup>1</sup>

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Aertens, Walter. *The Evaluation Report: Francophone Regional Advisory Committee (FRAC)*, April 1995.

## **FUTURE PLANS**

Collaboration on the FPMD II project with our subcontractor SatelLife, a non-profit organization that developed the electronic network HealthNet, provides an excellent opportunity to move forward with the goal of making the FRAC a sustainable network, both programmatically and financially. By introducing the FRAC members to HealthNet technology, it will be possible to create an electronic micro-network of FRAC members who can use the technology to further their dialogue between annual FRAC meetings, to access resources and materials about family planning program management, and to organize their annual meetings. The relatively low-cost of the HealthNet technology and the autonomy of the electronic micro network will also contribute to the financial sustainability of the FRAC.

We are currently working with the Malian FRAC Organizing Committee to prepare for the FRAC IX, to be held in Bamako, Mali on the theme of Community Management of Health Centers from November 11 to 23, 1996. The establishment of the FRAC micro-network will also be a significant part of the FRAC IX in preparation for connecting FRAC members to the network in the coming year.

Other themes that have been proposed for future FRAC meetings include:

- Haiti in 1997 on outreach strategies
- Niger or Burkina Faso in 1998 on integration
- Madagascar in 1999 on intersectoral collaboration
- Zaire in 2000 on program development and design