



GLOBAL EXCHANGE NETWORK FOR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH A Virtual Forum: “Financial Sustainability of Community Networks for Reproductive Health”

Global Exchange Network for Reproductive Health Team

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**“El papel del liderazgo es trascendental en la difusión de servicios
de salud sexual y reproductiva.” ~ José Elías Cabrejo Paredes (Peru)**

I BACKGROUND

The Global Exchange Network for Reproductive Health (GEN) is a virtual network of the USAID-funded Leadership, Management and Sustainability Program, implemented by Management Sciences for Health. Its goal is to contribute to improving the capacity and effectiveness of family planning and reproductive health programs and organizations by supporting the exchange of information about the management, leadership and organizational processes necessary to improve organizational sustainability and service quality. GEN has held a variety of virtual events such as conferences and forums to promote knowledge exchange between reproductive health practitioners and advocates.

I INTRODUCTION

A virtual forum entitled “Financial Sustainability of Community Networks for Reproductive Health” was in held in Spanish from September 22nd – October 1st 2006. This was the second of three virtual forums on different aspects of financial sustainability offered by GEN in this year. The forum was based on the experiences of two institutions working toward the sustainability of their reproductive health community’s networks (Profamilia from Nicaragua and APROFAM from Guatemala). Their experiences were shared through a report prepared by Eduardo Samoyoa, MSH Senior Program Associate who has provided technical assistance in the restructuring of both organizations to help them achieve their sustainability goals.

Dr. Hector Colindres’ document from the first forum, entitled “Challenges of Family Planning NGOs in Achieving Financial Sustainability”, was included as background reading material for this forum as it provides a foundation for discussions around sustainability as a systemic process.

II FORUM PARTICIPATION

Approximately 1,300 health professionals were invited to participate in the forum, including staff from NGOs, Ministries of Health, Universities, the United Nations, the Pan-American Health Organization, and local USAID missions.

During the forum 196 members (122 women) logged onto the GEN website and 75 members posted a total of 203 messages on the forum discussion page.

An additional 216 individuals signed up as members of the GEN Network to participate in this forum, bringing the total number of network members to 510.

The current registered members of the Network are from the following countries:

Country	No. of members	Country	No. of members
Peru	185	United States	11

Bolivia	69	Honduras	9
Mexico	63	Paraguay	6
Ecuador	52	Spain	6
Nicaragua	30	Brazil	5
Guatemala	24	Dominican Republic	5
El Salvador	19	Chile	5
Colombia	12	Others	9

III FORUM DISCUSSION THEMES

Representatives from Profamilia (Nicaragua) and APROFAM (Guatemala) participated in the forum discussion answering and commenting on the questions and statements of other participants. The discussions during the forum centered on the following four main issues:

Recreating the APROFAM and Profamilia experiences

All the participants recognized that the experiences are very useful and possible to recreate in their countries or organizations. However, most of them pointed out that in the community context of paternalistic approaches, rejection of family planning by some indigenous groups, an organizational context of resistance to change, lack of leadership, and dependency from external aid, promoting change can be difficult.

Another theme emerged that sustainability must begin in the community by empowering the local population, especially women. The community must participate in the identification and prioritization of the problems. By taking care of their health, the population acquires the habit and skill of finding solutions-- not only in relation to health but in relation to technical and social sustainability too.

A systems focus

Participants found that the same elements for achieving financial sustainability presented in Dr. Colindres's document in the first forum were also true for the sustainability of community networks. However, they suggested that it is important to include the government's policies and role in sustainability, especially in relation to free distribution of contraceptives methods and the definition of reproductive health programs.

Leadership

Participants remarked that leadership is one of the most important factors needed to make institutional changes towards sustainability. Examples, such as lack of focus, scanning and vision were cited, so an additional LMS document on leadership was shared during the forum, which participants found to be easy to read and useful.

Financial Sustainability of the community networks

Some participants remarked that community networks for family planning and contraceptive distribution is a very expensive way to offer reproductive health services because it is a combination of low recovery plus high cost on products and services distribution. This is a challenge for economic sustainability. But when it is not possible to have external aid, the priority is still to increase the efficiency of activities and processes, diversify of products, and apply cross-subsidies.

Questions and comments in relation to the community networks

- Many questions were in relation to the difference between focusing on the market and focusing on social issues.
- How can active community participation be increased while strengthening the relationship between education and health to improve prevention efforts?
- The role of NGOs is not to provide long-term services but to implement pilot programs so the government can assume the financial responsibility as part of its public agenda.
- APROFAM and Profamilia's next challenge is to go beyond financial sustainability and impact their institutional goals for achieving the reduction of maternal and child morbidity and mortality.

VI. FACTORS OF SUCCESS

Elements of success of the forum were:

Length of the forum: Participation in this forum which was only one week was greater than in the previous two week forum. The facilitators concluded that a one week forum is sufficient for soliciting responses and addressing the topic.

Reading materials: All the documents shared during this forum were actively discussed, and including Dr. Colindres's document from the first forum allowed new members to participate more fully. The addition of a document on leadership in response to participant comments allowed a fuller discussion on the role of leadership in achieving sustainability.

Community Network Representatives: The representatives from APROFAM and Profamilia participated actively in the forum, answering questions and providing more complete explanations.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Some recommendations for future forums are:

1. Increase the forum participation, especially of participants from countries that have been under-represented in the past. For example, we did not have many participants from Nicaragua or Guatemala, even when the experiences were from those countries.
2. The representatives from APROFAM and Profamilia did not participate in the first 2 days of the forum. In future forums we will ensure key stakeholders

- commit to participating from the beginning and for the entire duration of the forum.
3. Although there was a much high response rate to the evaluation for this forum, we plan to facilitate the evaluation process by allowing participants to respond directly on the GEN website.

VIII. THE NEXT FORUM

The third forum in a series of three forums on Financial Sustainability of Reproductive Health Programs and Organizations is being held from December 4th to the 8th 2006. The title of this forum is: “Financial Sustainability of Reproductive Health Programs for Adolescents.”