

# Approaches to Effective Engagement of Religious Leaders on Family Planning and Population in Malawi

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## Background

Fundamental changes in Malawi's population and development trajectory are unlikely to occur until social norms shift to support women and girls' empowerment, and Malawians choose to have smaller families. Approximately 97 percent of Malawians align with a faith, which often governs customs and traditional law and practices. Religious leaders' support for changing social norms is critical to achieving widespread acceptance of family planning practices as religious leaders have an enduring presence in local communities and have networks beyond those of government or development partners.



Photo by N'zatonse

## Methods

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded Health Policy Plus (HP+) project provided grants and technical support to six religious mother bodies in Malawi to implement family planning advocacy interventions including community dialogues and meetings with traditional leaders, youth, and media. ACT Alliance, funded by the German government through the German development bank, KfW, and led by DanChurchAid, provided funds and technical support to Protestant, Muslim, and Catholic partners to address institutional barriers through capacity-building interventions and development of faith-based family planning advocacy strategy and youth teaching Guides.

## Results

The results presented here pertain to achievements made during the yearlong implementation of HP+ grants and the ACT Alliance initiative that was implemented in two phases over a four-year period. Overall, most of the leaders reached are male due to the structure of most faith groups in Malawi.

### HP+ Grants

The mother bodies promoted a faith-based understanding of family planning, reaching various leaders (Figure 1) and 7,461 other congregants with workshops and trainings, including training of trainers. They engaged district and central government leaders to make policy recommendations with regard to population and development issues and discuss the roles and responsibilities of government and faith leaders in ensuring access to family planning services. These activities have led to increased acceptance of family planning information and services and open discussion among congregants and communities.

Despite a short implementation period and limited resources, behavior change for family planning advocacy among religious leaders' peers and within their communities was observed. For example, Imams are now more willing to talk openly about family planning and population issues, as observed during their participation in a symposium led by DanChurchAid.

### ACT Alliance Initiative

Through the ACT Alliance project, faith-based organizations increased youth access to family planning services through community facilitators who provided basic family planning services and youth counseling door-to-door. They developed specific tools to institutionalize family planning beyond the project, such as through Muslim and Christian teaching guides for youth. With technical support from Pact, partner institutions developed policies to guide their approaches to youth-friendly health services.

## Results (continued)

Increased community awareness and strengthened reporting mechanisms for human rights violations led to an increase and redress in reported cases. Religious leaders also worked with traditional leaders to develop and enforce community bylaws aimed at curbing gender-based violence and other human rights violations (see Table 1 for leaders reached through the project).

Figure 1. Number of leaders reached under the HP+ initiative

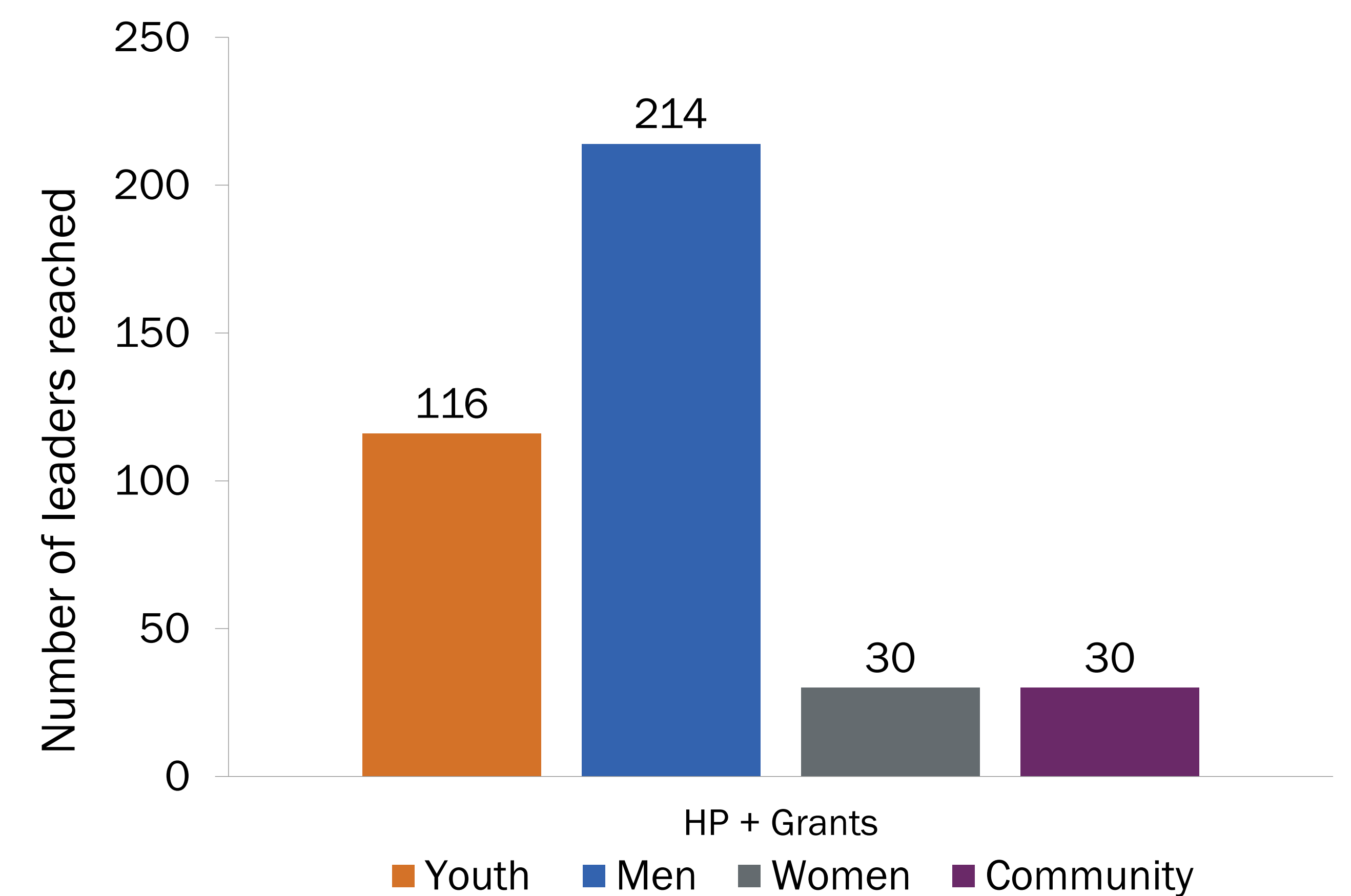


Table 1. Number of leaders reached under the ACT Alliance initiative

	Political	Traditional	Religious
Phase 1	349	22,109	19,859
Phase 2	226	10,856	6,107
Total	575	32,965	25,966

## Conclusions

Religious leaders can and should be engaged in family planning programming, both as a specific audience for targeted outreach and as part of mainstream activities. With development partners' support, local religious leaders designed creative approaches and leveraged their internal institutional structures to reach members of the population who may be resistant to family planning messaging or have misconceptions that their religion prohibits them from using modern family planning methods.

Faith leaders are well-positioned to assume greater ownership and leadership of family planning and population issues, and to facilitate dialogue and promote advocacy at the community level that can inform national-level programming. Religious leaders in Malawi are willing to share family planning messaging with their constituents and able to effectively advocate for family planning behavior in alignment with their religious beliefs.

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DanChurchAid (DCA) and Norwegian Church Aid are the Action by Churches Together (ACT) Alliance lead organizations implementing the project Strengthening Public Private Partnerships in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SPPPP-SRHR) locally known as N'zatonse. The project, funded through KfW by the German Cooperation and implemented from March 2014 to December 2020, aims to achieve informed demand for and access to high-quality sexual and reproductive health and rights information, products and services.

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