



**A Model for Making Interministerial
Collaboration Work:**
Implementing Malawi's Youth-Friendly Health Services Strategy

Authors: Alyson Lipsky,
Dezio Macheso,
Pia Mingkwan, and
Meagan Meekins

Introduction

In 2016, the Malawi Ministry of Health (MOH) launched the National Youth-Friendly Health Services (YFHS) Strategy with the goal of strengthening and streamlining health services for youth. The strategy is targeted toward young people aged 10–24, who make up 35 percent of the population of Malawi (Malawi National Statistical Office, 2019). It was developed with the recognition

that youth have specific health needs, and meeting these will ensure the Malawi government fulfills youth rights and contributes to a healthy future for the country. The strategy is designed to ensure that youth-friendly health services are delivered in a holistic manner and that they are high quality, relevant, accessible, attractive, affordable, appropriate, and acceptable.

The MOH's Reproductive Health Directorate led the development of the strategy, which comprises five priority areas: policy environment, service delivery, coordination and collaboration, community mobilization including youth, and resource mobilization.

Box 1: Interministerial Collaboration Required

The strategy calls for multiple government ministries to work together at national and district levels to achieve the ambitious goals that have been laid out in each of the five priority areas. Successful implementation of the strategy requires collaboration among the Reproductive Health Directorate; the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare; and the Ministry of Youth and Sports. However, coordinating this level of comprehensive collaboration between government ministries at national and district levels is challenging.

Grassroots Implementation of YFHS Strategy

In 2017, with support from the U.S. Agency for International Development-funded Health Policy Plus (HP+) project, the Malawi government promoted successful collaboration among the MOH; the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare; and the Ministry of Youth and Sports to implement the YFHS Strategy in three communities in Mangochi District. HP+ launched an innovative approach

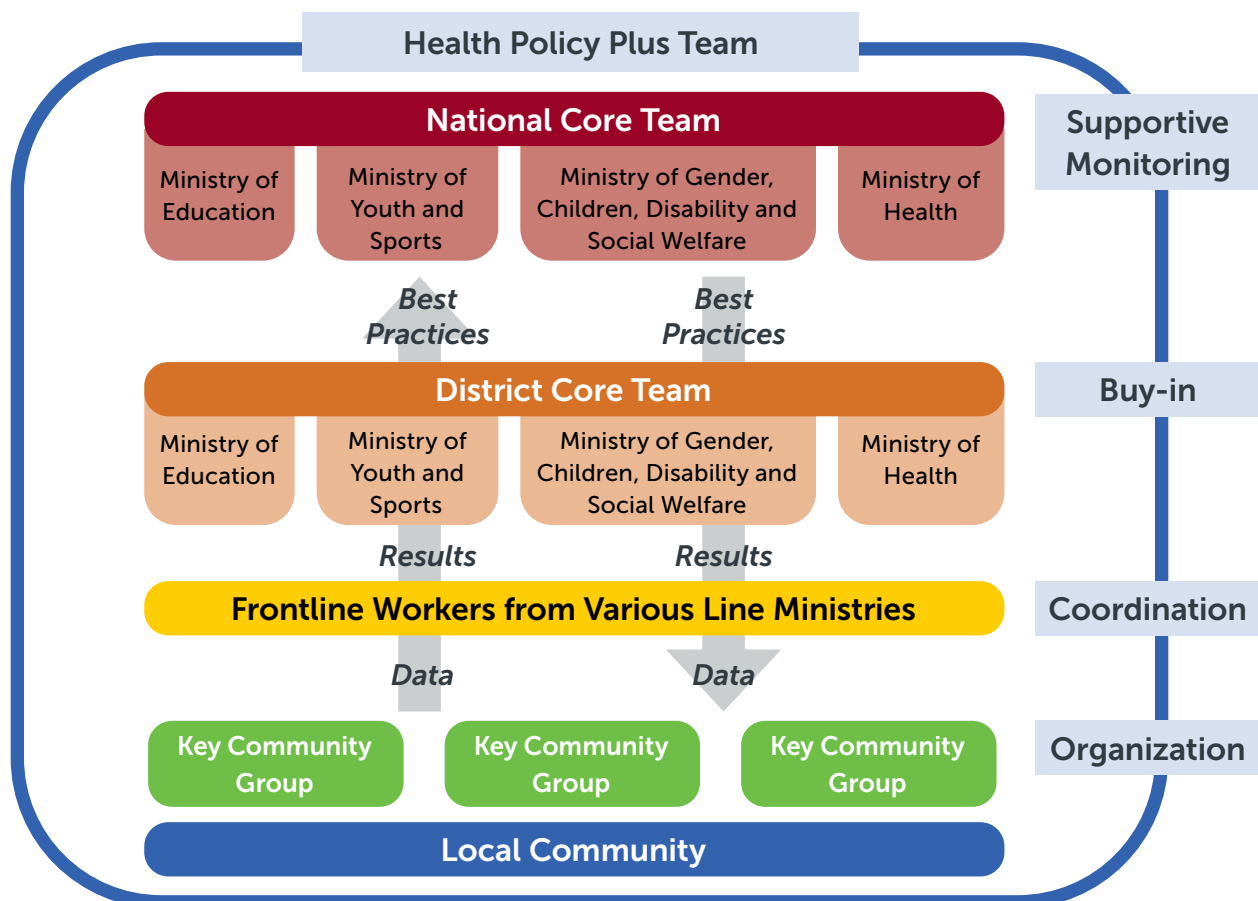
in Mangochi that linked the entire health system—from the national to community level and back up—to support implementation of the YFHS Strategy (see Figure 1). After generating support at national and district levels, HP+ worked with three communities in Mangochi to ensure a full understanding of all YFHS-related activities taking place at the community level. Activities included a stakeholder mapping exercise and training facilitators from each of the four ministries and nongovernmental organization partners to conduct community-level YFHS advocacy workshops with seven key community groups. The workshops also included, in addition to community members, representatives from the ministries, HP+ staff, and frontline government workers from the four ministries including health center personnel. The workshops focused on identifying local issues and solutions and developing action

plans. Common challenges addressed in the action plans included forced/child marriage, teen pregnancy, a rising incidence of school dropouts, and misconceptions/a lack of knowledge about YFHS.

This grassroots approach to implementing the YFHS Strategy serves as an example of interministerial collaboration for successful policy implementation. The strong interministerial collaboration during the strategy implementation in Mangochi has led to impressive outcomes in the district, including:

- Improved community understanding of YFHS, dispelled misconceptions about YFHS, and a lowering of barriers to access for youth
- Strengthened interministerial understanding of each ministry's role

Figure 1: Collaboration Across Stakeholders



within the YFHS space, facilitation of services and mentorship to communities, and provision of services by designated ministries and ministry and community ownership of the program

- Improved youth participation in decision-making spaces at the community level, and capacity to mobilize resources for YFHS through entrepreneurship, fulfilling the adage, “Nothing for us without us”
- Increased youth knowledge and uptake of family planning services

The government of Malawi and HP+ achieved this success by strengthening five distinct and essential components for achieving collective impact: **a common agenda, mutually reinforcing activities, shared measurement systems, continuous communication, and a backbone organization** (Kania and Kramer, 2011). This brief demonstrates how national, district, and community project partners were able to effectively leverage all five components needed to achieve interministerial support and collaboration for the successful implementation of the YFHS Strategy in Mangochi District.

Component 1: Common agenda

The first step in promoting collaboration among the four key ministries was the establishment of a common agenda for the activity. HP+ staff engaged each ministry to provide inputs for a guiding concept note and an activity approach outline. With a draft concept note in hand, the HP+ team then convened a meeting with the four ministries, during which HP+ shared the concept note and approach and made adjustments based on the feedback provided.

After representatives from the four ministries agreed upon the approach for the activity, a

national core team was created. Composed of key technical leads from each ministry, this team was responsible for leading and facilitating the interministerial collaboration over the course of this activity. HP+ and the national core team reached out to each ministry’s representative at the district level to obtain support and buy-in for the activity.

This approach ensured the ministries were committed to the approach, and that they shared a common understanding of roles and responsibilities among the different ministries and levels of government. With support from the ministries at the national level, a district core team that mirrored the national core team’s structure was established and was composed of district-level ministry representatives.

The final approved activity focused on implementing the YFHS Strategy from the ground up. It was designed to be community-led with coordination and support from HP+ and the four collaborating ministries. The seven key community groups targeted were 1) parent-teacher associations; 2) school management committees; 3) in-school youth; 4) out-of-school youth in youth clubs and youth networks; 5) traditional community leaders; 6) religious community leaders; and 7) traditional healers and counselors. These groups interacted with the district core team, which facilitated capacity-building workshops and discussions to build activity plans as well as provided ongoing support.

Component 2: Mutually reinforcing activities

With a common agenda grounded in the YFHS Strategy in place, successful implementation then hinged on the ministries’ ability to support activities in a coordinated fashion. Each ministry brought different kinds of expertise to the table, all of which are necessary to effectively implement the YFHS Strategy. After

district-level stakeholders committed to the approach, the national core team shared important experiences and lessons learned from previous activities implemented by the various ministries around the country with the district core team.

The district core team became the champion of this activity and used guidance from the YFHS Strategy to inform the design of workshops for the key community groups. Representatives from the four ministries contributed specific lessons and activity ideas based on their experience and expertise. The workshops were designed to introduce the key community groups to the YFHS Strategy and work with them to identify challenges and brainstorm possible solutions. The district core team facilitated and led this process with the key community groups and then supported them in creating an action plan that they would implement. With successful implementation of the YFHS Strategy as the goal and guiding principle, the district-level facilitators were trained on the same materials and instructed on the same processes for the workshops to ensure a common understanding of what would be shared across the seven key community groups.

At the workshops, each ministry had representation from the community, district, and as available, the national level to answer questions from the community groups and support them in their action planning or to review any challenges. Having access to these experts, the community groups could integrate different suggested activities into their action plans, which would rely on experiences and expertise from each of the ministries to implement. These activities not only allowed different community groups to take on mutually reinforcing roles within the activity to improve implementation of the YFHS Strategy, but also integrated various ministries' expertise within each of their plans.

Component 3: Shared measurement systems

To work toward the common goal of successfully implementing the YFHS Strategy, the activity was designed so that progress could be measured across the seven different key community groups. HP+'s approach ensured that all stakeholders understood the activity process and roles and responsibilities. HP+ provided each key community group with a standard reporting collection template to track progress toward the goals they had laid out and to document success and best practices.

To assess the progress of each of the groups, the HP+ team convened quarterly collaborative community review meetings. Representatives from government frontline workers, the district core team, and the national core team attended the meetings. Representatives from the key community groups presented their progress and then opened the floor for comments. As community groups asked clarifying questions of one another and identified partnership opportunities, these meetings engendered collaboration among the stakeholders. Government frontline worker representatives could comment on how the activities had resulted in changes in their facilities.

After attending these meetings, the national core team members could integrate recommendations and lessons learned from the key community groups. Recommendations and lessons learned were incorporated into policy and planning discussions in technical working groups as well as their own programming. The multisectoral and multilevel attendance of these quarterly community review meetings established the connection between the community-level work and the national-level YFHS Strategy. The meetings also allowed the

impact of community interventions to inform district- and national-level actions.

During the two years this activity was conducted, a district-level review meeting was convened once a year. Selected representatives from the key community groups were asked to attend the meeting and present their results to national and district ministry staff. Presenting the community-level results at this meeting provided yet another opportunity to ensure that recommendations from community-level interventions would be considered in policy making. The meeting also served as a space for national-level representatives to inform district- and community-level representatives on upcoming initiatives and funding opportunities that could be tapped to further YFHS initiatives.

These review meetings at the community and district level served as accountability mechanisms for progress toward implementing the YFHS Strategy. Routine health indicator data in the District Health Information Software 2 were reviewed as part of the quarterly reports distributed to district leadership to understand effects of the activity on adolescent health.

Component 4: Continuous communication

Because the activity involved various actors, and several ministries engaged at different levels of government, effective communication was essential. Both formal and informal communication played key roles in advancing and sharing knowledge throughout the activity.

Stakeholders used community meetings as a communication and feedback mechanism. For example, the community- and district-level review meetings described above served as important communication points, as stakeholders present came from multiple

levels of government—community, district, and national.

Informally, national- and district-level ministry staff communicated through a WhatsApp group consistently to discuss programming and ideas at the different ministries. Texting and cell phone communication were essential to ensuring that ministry staff stayed up to date and on the same page. Email and internet connections are not always readily accessible or reliable, so texting was an important tool for communicating accurate information and receiving timely feedback among the staff. District staff would suggest a community group meeting so that national staff could arrange to attend. Ministry staff were communicating across ministries and national-level members were in contact informally with their ministry counterparts at the district level as well. District core team representatives met frequently for planning community meetings and documenting progress.

District core team and workshop participants served a critical communication role after the workshops. For instance, 687 workshop participants reached out to 6,723 community members within four weeks, and the number doubled after another four weeks. These formal and informal feedback loops resulted in continuous improvements in community-level implementation informed by national-level expert advice.

Component 5: Backbone support organization

Given the variety of groups involved in this activity—four key ministries serving as part of the national core team and the district core team, community health workers, and community members—it was extremely important to have a coordinating body with a bird’s-eye view of all participants. In this activity, the “backbone” position was played

by the HP+ Malawi team. The HP+ team launched the interministerial collaboration for the activity by soliciting inputs across the four ministries to create and define a common goal and to secure buy-in. HP+ also coordinated meetings and discussions at the national and district level. The team collected data and shared outcomes with the ministries and community. HP+ was able to serve as a neutral broker, able to convene the varied stakeholders and ensure everyone was able to stay informed and engaged despite busy schedules.

Lessons Learned

The purpose of the activity was to catalyze actions at the community level in support of the YFHS Strategy by linking all relevant ministries and all different levels. The activity succeeded as communities came together to address significant challenges around forced/child marriage, teen pregnancy, and incidence of school dropout, among other issues. This success was made possible by strong interministerial collaboration at all levels of government. It relied on a common agenda, mutually reinforcing activities, shared measurement, constant communication, and the support of a backbone organization. This activity offers important lessons learned to help inform both the next version of the Strategy and scale-up efforts, as well as other efforts that require multisectoral coordination.

Sustain momentum through regular communication at all levels

To effectively support grassroots activities, regular communication and follow-up from the district core team at the community level was a key factor. It helped ensure community stakeholders were moving forward with their action plans. The district core team was able to follow up on the action plans because of the support it received from district-level ministries, which was itself tied to the support from the national level. For the

activity to achieve success at the community level, communication across all levels was necessary.

Use collaboration to support community commitment to expanding access to YFHS

This highly collaborative approach led to tangible examples of ongoing cooperation and leveraging of resources. For example, in one community, a youth club supported healthcare workers with transport funds so they could travel to a smaller community and conduct a family planning awareness meeting for youth. Another youth club is mobilizing resources to construct a standalone YFHS facility with land donated by the village chief.

Employ real-time multilevel interministerial collaboration to provide quick access to essential information

Drawing on expertise from the four ministries proved useful in bringing out relevant, timely information on a wide range of issues, and in explaining sector-specific policies, laws, or by-laws. When a group planned or reported to have carried out an activity for which they did not have a mandate, representatives from the four ministries at review meetings were immediately able to clarify roles and responsibilities. For example, most youth structures, including school councils, would report that they were conducting awareness meetings in the communities. The Ministry of Education would then clarify the roles of school councils, specifically that their purview is confined to school facilities. Other review meeting participants would be able to provide an alternative partner for those meetings. In some cases, participants would highlight what appeared to be a contradiction in policies among different ministries and ministry participants were able to clarify such issues at the meeting.

Moving Forward

Considering these valuable lessons will be important if any stakeholders consider replicating and scaling up this process within Malawi. The lessons also will be valuable for those working on other multisectoral strategies. By creating sustainable communication and sustaining buy-in from multiple levels and ministries, Mangochi District was able to implement a policy-level strategy to create meaningful change for youth in their communities. When working to create change in systems, interministerial collaboration, while complex, can be very effective and is essential. Establishing distinct roles and responsibilities across the different ministries and stakeholders involved also ensured ownership for the initiative; the presence of district- and national-level representatives at community-level activities

reinforced for community members that their actions and mandates were part of a larger goal and that they had the power to influence national-level changes. This collaborative effort across ministries and stakeholder levels serves as a good example of how to create a lasting impact that is felt, understood, and owned by all involved parties.

References

Kania, J. and M. Kramer. 2011. "Collective Impact." *Stanford Social Innovation Review* Winter: 36-42. Available at: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact#.

Malawi National Statistical Office. 2019. *2018 Malawi Population and Housing Census*. Lilongwe, Malawi: Malawi National Statistical Office.

CONTACT US

Health Policy Plus
1331 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20004
www.healthpolicyplus.com
policyinfo@thepalladiumgroup.com

Health Policy Plus (HP+) is a seven-year cooperative agreement funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development under Agreement No. AID-OAA-A-15-00051, beginning August 28, 2015. HP+ is implemented by Palladium, in collaboration with Avenir Health, Futures Group Global Outreach, Plan International USA, Population Reference Bureau, RTI International, ThinkWell, and the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood.

This publication was produced for review by the U.S. Agency for International Development. It was prepared by HP+. The information provided in this document is not official U.S. Government information and does not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the U.S. Agency for International Development or the U.S. Government.

Photo credit: Amaru Photography for HP+

