

Health Policy Plus: Malawi

Overview

The Health Policy Plus (HP+) project, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), has been working with the Malawi government, civil society, development partners, and youth from 2016 to 2022. Through this work HP+ has implemented a comprehensive program to improve maternal and newborn health, support access to reproductive health, HIV, and cervical cancer services, address equity—including through positive youth development—and strengthen health systems and data demand and use. HP+ supported policy implementation and monitoring at national and subnational levels and strengthened the capacity of civil society to advocate for health funding. The project also improved information systems to capture health data, funded by the U.S. President's Malaria Initiative, and strengthened the capacity of government and partners to use data for decision making, advocacy, policy implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

HP+ facilitated multisectoral engagement from the national level to the community level. This work included engaging communities through traditional and religious leaders on HIV prevention and treatment programs and efforts to reduce early marriage and gender-based violence. HP+ promoted youth participation in policymaking and advocacy to hold decisionmakers accountable and to increase access to youth-friendly health services.

Engaging Communities to Strengthen Health Programs

EMPOWERING YOUTH

Aligned with USAID's Positive Youth Development framework, HP+ worked with youth leaders through mentorship, monitoring, and coaching to strengthen

Engaging Districts and Communities in Policy Implementation

In Malawi's decentralized government, district-level leadership must deliver health and social services. HP+ supported the rollout of policies and strategies from the national level to the district level and, in some cases, to the community level. For example, HP+ worked with several district taskforces to integrate family planning activities from the national costed implementation plan into district implementation plans, helped establish district-level oversight to monitor implementation of the national condom strategy and the adolescent girls and young women strategy, and engaged youth and other stakeholders to implement the youth-friendly health services strategy.

their capacity as advocates for change in health policy and to help them grow businesses and create peer networks through entrepreneurship training. Topics for advocacy included early marriage, youth-friendly health services, sexual and reproductive health, and uptake of HIV testing and treatment. Following training, youth champions and youth organizations have successfully advocated for funding increases for youth-friendly health services, engaged high-level officials (including Parliament and the First Lady) to reduce unmet need for contraceptives, and led the development of district strategies for youth. Youth clubs in Mangochi have channeled their collaborative efforts into forming the first youth-led and youth-centered cooperative in

the district. They have dramatically increased their profits and, thus, the funds they can invest in youth corners and support for local family planning initiatives.

ENGAGING TRADITIONAL AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Religious leaders are important for advocacy and social behavior change in Malawi, where 98 percent of people are members of a faith community. HP+ provided grants to the six major religious bodies in Malawi (both Christian and Muslim) to engage congregations and communities on family planning and HIV testing, treatment, and care—[especially working with men and boys to increase uptake of HIV testing](#) and dispel myths about faith healing. Since the effort began, 36,752 men and boys were helped to access HIV testing services, 255 new people accessed HIV treatment, 3,927 people were returned to care after defaulting from antiretroviral therapy, and 24,843 people were counseled on adherence to antiretroviral therapy. In the long term, sustained adherence could contribute to a decrease in HIV transmission and better survival rates among those who are HIV-positive.

HP+ also engaged traditional and religious leaders to address Malawi's persistently high rates of child marriage and forced marriage. In the districts of Chikwawa and Machinga, the leaders were trained to work with their communities and with police to ensure child protection and enforcement of the law on legal age of marriage.

Strengthening Data Quality and Use

High-quality and accessible data are essential to ensure that policy and program planning and management are effective. A 2018 assessment of Malawi's national health management information system showed a lack of information products on health data and indicated that most government staff had inadequate skills in data

analysis and interpretation. HP+ supported the Ministry of Health to develop the comprehensive *Monitoring, Evaluation, and Health Information Systems Strategy for 2017–2022* and to improve data quality and data use at the national level and among partners. The project also worked with partners to expand the DHIS2 software to 31 facilities in 15 districts and trained over 300 users from central hospitals. With HP+ support, indicators on youth-friendly health services were incorporated into the DHIS2 and district reporting performance was strengthened. HP+ further supported updating and configuring data platforms, such as the Integrated Supervision System and the Youth Management Information System.

HP+ used data to generate user-friendly evidence for advocacy and decision making. Data came from sources such as the DHIS2, demographic and health surveys, and the National Statistics Office as well as being generated from policy models.¹ The resulting outputs include [estimates of the impact of population growth on development](#); [fact sheets about barriers faced by adolescent girls and young women](#) at both the national and district level; [a guide on the health budget advocacy cycle and messages](#); bulletins on family planning, youth-friendly services, and the health management information system; and [prioritized family planning interventions for key districts](#)—all of which can help districts needing extra support to prioritize high-impact interventions. District leaders and decisionmakers are using these tools, messages, and evidence for advocacy and program decision making on family planning budgeting and youth-friendly health services.

Strengthening Accountability Systems

Because national health strategies are implemented at the district level, HP+ has enhanced capacity at both national and district levels by strengthening existing governance structures and establishing new ones where needed. The bodies monitor strategy

¹ HP+ applied several of the [Spectrum policy models](#), including DemProj, which projects demographic indicators, and Resources for the Awareness of Population Impacts on Development, or RAPID, which projects the social and economic consequences of high fertility and rapid population growth across various sectors. The project also applied the FP Goals model for setting and prioritizing family planning interventions.

implementation and ensure high-quality services across health areas. For example, the project supported establishment of a new steering committee to oversee the *National Cervical Cancer Control Strategy (2016–2020)*, coordinate partner inputs, and improve data quality. HP+ also oriented a national mentorship team to supervise facilities implementing the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative to ensure the quality of services to promote breastfeeding as a baby’s best nutritional start in life. In each district, HP+ set up a Condom Coordination Committee to manage implementation of the condom strategy. The project also helped set up governance bodies to make sure that services for adolescent girls and young women are available as described in the national strategy and to coordinate a referral system to improve efficiency. HP+ worked with the Nurses and Midwives Council of Malawi and the Reproductive Health Directorate to update

professional standards and protocols—tools that will help health facility staff understand what is expected of them and enable supervisors to hold them accountable.

Mobilizing Domestic Resources for Family Planning

The government of Malawi is highly dependent on donors to fund its health sector; a brief on [Malawi’s National Health Accounts](#) reports that about 58 percent of the health budget in 2018 came from donors. In 2013, Malawi established a national budget line item for family planning commodities. Over the course of HP+, the amount allocated for this purpose has fluctuated. In 2021, the family planning line item represented just 2 percent of the commodity needs outlined in the national family planning costed implementation plan. Further, the allocation gains made over time at the national level were not mirrored at the district level.

TOOLS, CURRICULA, AND GUIDES

[Effective Community Champions: Helping Traditional Leaders Fight Child, Early, and Forced Marriage](#)

[How-to Guide: Bringing Malawi’s National Youth-Friendly Health Services Strategy to the Grassroots Level](#)

[How-to Guide: Implementing the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative in Malawi](#)

[How-to Guide: Integrating Family Planning Interventions into District Implementation Plans in Malawi](#)

Integrated supervision toolkit to improve quality care for women and newborns*

[Intergenerational Mentoring Guide: How to Mentor Youth to Advocate for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights](#)

[A Model for Making Interministerial Collaboration Work: Implementing Malawi’s Youth-Friendly Health Services Strategy](#)

[Policy modeling curriculum used at Chancellor College, University of Malawi](#)

[Reaching Men and Boys with Messages of Hope: Facilitator’s Guide for Training Faith Leaders in Malawi](#)

Tools for [reporting on cervical cancer](#), tracking family planning interventions and [condom distribution](#), and using the youth management information system

[Youth Leadership and Youth-Friendly Health Services Policy Advocacy Training](#)

* White Ribbon Alliance Malawi supported the Ministry of Health’s Quality Management Directorate, the Nurses and Midwives Council of Malawi, the Medical Council of Malawi, and the Pharmacy and Medicines Regulatory Authority to harmonize their tools for supervision and assessments of health facilities. The integrated tool is not yet published.

In response, HP+ worked to strengthen local actors to advocate for increased domestic funding for family planning. It trained civil society organizations and youth champions on advocacy for increased family planning funding and directly engaged the government on the need for more domestic spending and timely budget execution on family planning—an effort that should continue because donor financial support is decreasing. Training participants have taken what they've learned and worked together to deliver health budget advocacy messages to encourage members of Parliament to allocate more resources for family planning at the national level. Some youth champions have used the tools and lessons from the trainings to successfully advocate for greater funding for youth-friendly health services at the district level while other youth participants have applied what they learned to successfully mobilize funding through donor-funded grants.

The Way Forward

Through its engagement with the government, civil society, and youth, HP+ has helped strengthen the implementation and oversight of policies to improve access to and demand for high-quality health services, including family planning, HIV, cervical cancer, and maternal and newborn health. Ongoing efforts to sustain progress toward stronger health systems should include:

- Continued multisectoral engagement, stakeholder coordination, and youth participation to address the health and

development needs of youth and expand youth-friendly health services.

- Advocacy for increased programmatic and financial investments in family planning at national and district levels and improvement in technical efficiency to achieve FP2030 commitments.
- Advocacy and support to national oversight teams to prioritize supportive supervision at subnational levels to ensure services adhere to established standards, including maternal health and newborn care services.
- Increased awareness among policymakers, program managers, and the private sector to gain support for population and development issues, including implementation of family planning programs and services.
- Technical support to strengthen district-level capacity to implement and monitor programs and services, with improved data quality and reporting on health indicators.
- Investment in positive youth development activities that empower young people to meaningfully participate in policy development and implementation.

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