

# Improving public sector investment for family planning in Malawi

## Introduction

The Women's Integrated Sexual Health (WISH) 2 Access Choice Together Innovate Ownership Now (ACTION), (WISH2Action) programme (2018-2023) in Malawi is being implemented by a consortium led by the Family Planning Association of Malawi (FPAM), Development Media International (DMI) and Options Consultancy Services Ltd. Options' role in the project has been to build a supportive legal, financial and policy framework for sustainable family planning and a conducive environment for sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for all women and girls to ensure they face fewer risks during pregnancy and childbirth.

In Malawi, the WISH programme has focused on advocating for an increase in domestic allocation to the government's family planning (FP) budget line, which was created in 2013 in response to the Family Planning Summit 2020 in London<sup>1</sup>. This paper is aimed at documenting a summary of the programme's technical approach and enabling factors for successful advocacy interventions to improve public sector investment for FP/SRH in Malawi.

### Enablers on key advocacy approaches used in Malawi:

- 1 Enhancing government capacity to generate and utilise evidence for advocacy and decision-making enables them to plan, budget and spend better
- 2 Engaging stakeholders in budget advocacy increases cohesion and buy-in of recommendations
- 3 National leadership and ownership of processes for identifying and solving emerging challenges e.g., FP commodity stockout, is a key driver to successful outcomes
- 4 Applying systems thinking approaches to budget advocacy facilitates interactions and relationships with government ministries and stakeholders that build consensus on accountability

1. The Family Planning Summit 2020 in London was co-hosted by the UK Government, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), and the Bill Melinda Gates Foundation in close partnership with the FP2020 Secretariat.

## Overview of the problem

Malawi is a donor-dependent (approximately 58% of total health sector budget) Sub-Saharan African country with low levels of total health expenditure, approximated at USD 40 per capita (Ministry of Health, 2020). Despite these challenges, the Government of Malawi (GOM) has made great strides towards improving FP access and coverage, recording a reduction in Malawi's fertility rate from 6.0 to 4.2 between 2004 and 2016 (Demographic and Health Survey, 2017). However, the bulk of these improvements have been attributed to donor funding since the GOM's contributed only 10% of the funding toward the purchase of FP commodities.

## Technical approach

WISH2ACTION's technical approach to improving public sector investment in FP comprises three broad areas: i) understanding the context, ii) engaging stakeholders and iii) advocacy and accountability. In this section, we describe the programme's technical approach in detail, which is summarised in Figure 2 below.

Figure 1: The map of Malawi



Figure 2: Technical approach to improving public sector investment for FP in Malawi



## Understanding the context through political economy analysis

In 2019, WISH2ACTION conducted several studies to understand the health financing landscape in Malawi. A broad-based political economy analysis with specific health financing outputs was conducted to provide an understanding of the financing terrain, the gaps that affect availability and flow of FP funds and the opportunities to influence FP/SRH investment decisions in Malawi.

### Health financing context analysis

The health financing context analysis provided insights to understanding the environment of FP/SRH financing in Malawi and the political environment including the power nexus and dynamics that influence decisions around financing health priorities. The methods used in the analyses were desk reviews, a PEA workshop, stakeholder mapping exercises and in-depth interviews. The following weak spots were identified: a lack of a financial gap analysis for FP, poor donor coordination and weak financial management capacity at local government authority level.

### Funding flow analysis

The funding flow analysis provided a more detailed understanding of how FP commodities are financed, budgeted, purchased and delivered. The methodology included a desk review of documents, stock card analysis of a sample of health facilities and key informant interviews in central and selected district government institutions. The key gaps identified in these studies included:

- Late release of FP domestic funds, which contributes to low expenditure rates, delayed procurement, and receipt

of contraceptives. Furthermore, low expenditure rates make it harder for stakeholders to advocate for increase in allocation for FP/commodity budgets.

- Lack of processes and tools in place at the Reproductive Health Directorate (RHD) to track expenditure under the FP budget line contributes to inefficiencies and poor oversight of spending.
- Persistent contraceptive stockouts in health facilities across the country make it difficult for the government to honour its FP2020 commitments outlined above.
- Lack of clarity on the effectiveness of the oversight provided by the central medical stores trust (CMST) on the activities of the third-party contractors responsible for last mile distribution.
- Irregular distribution schedules by CMST leave facilities without FP commodities occasionally for more than three months.

### Stakeholder engagement

WISH established strategic relationships with a range of stakeholders. This laid a strong foundation for partner coordination and participation that created important entry points for locating and gathering data from government sources, conducting the analyses outlined above and conducting collective advocacy.

Key stakeholders included: the Reproductive Health Department (RHD) under the Ministry of Health (MoH) which is responsible for the national FP programme and Manaso the accountability mechanism. WISH also identified other implementing partners with similar interests and objectives in the FP/SRH space, such as Palladium via the HP+ project, Care Malawi (the FP2020 CSO focal point) and the White Ribbon Alliance. WISH formed an FP health financing coalition with these partners to allow for synergy in achieving FP/SRH goals.

WISH provided the following technical support to RHD and Manaso: i) capacity development in budget analysis and using budget data through training and mentorship; ii) developing and disseminating evidence briefs, press releases and an investment case to advocate for an FP budget increase iii) providing logistical support for advocacy engagements with members of parliament and government ministries, departments and agencies; iv) supporting accountability processes on resource use through the development and use of budget monitoring tools and evidence generated. The latter was aimed at holding MoH-RHD to account on the timely utilisation of allocated and released funds for FP/SRH, and for FP commodity procurement in particular.

To institutionalize accountability and advocacy efforts, the programme supported Manaso to develop a five-year accountability and advocacy strategy and the MOH to develop a health financing strategy 2022-2027 that prioritises FP/SRH. These strategies present an opportunity for sustaining WISH's accomplishments on the health financing pathway of change.

## Advocacy and accountability

WISH employed the different advocacy approaches in Malawi to advocate for increased domestic investments in family planning as outlined below:

**Developing advocacy products:** WISH developed an investment case from the budget analysis data that Manaso used to influence parliamentarians, government officials and partners to recognise the need to increase domestic investment in family planning. The data analysis process involved pulling relevant data from budget books, the District Health Information System (DHIS), national health accounts, expenditure reports, and entering it into pre-designed

budget analysis tool developed by Options. This tool also allowed the mechanism to generate a budget scorecard, linking expenditure data against service delivery targets to gauge performance.

**Influencing decision-makers:** To influence decision-makers, it is important to identify key institutions, the decision makers and influencers upfront. This helps to understand the power and interests of decision makers and influencers and identify appropriate advocacy channels and methods. Manaso targeted government officials and parliamentarians by presenting evidence briefs and investment cases to influence decisions to increase FP budget allocation, while politicians were targeted by publishing articles in print media. An important factor to consider when choosing advocacy methods is timing. This is why WISH also supported Manaso to identify the right forum and timing to undertake advocacy activities by publishing media briefs on the opening of the Parliament and during Parliament budget sitting in national papers.

### Use of media in advocacy

The publication of the media brief during the 2021 parliament budget sitting in the two main national daily newspapers was timed to coincide with the opening of the Parliament, to enable Members of Parliament to read these advocacy messages on the day of the budget deliberations, providing them with the evidence to back-up their arguments.

## Holding the government of Malawi to account

Manaso took lead in utilising budget monitoring tools to hold the GOM accountable for the effectively and efficiently utilising allocated FP funds. This data analysis process helped identify the unspent and subsequent loss of FP funds in

the 2020/2021 financial year. Manasao also conducted bottleneck analysis to uncover the causes of underspending and presented the findings of this analysis at a high-level forum attended by representatives from MOH, CMST, health financing CSOs and donors. One key recommendation was for the MOH to consider using UNFPA as its FP commodity procurement agent as this save costs and ensures timely procurement processes.

## Key enablers to improving public sector investment in Malawi

### 1 Enhancing government capacity to generate and utilise evidence for advocacy and decision making enables them to plan better

WISH2ACTION's development and dissemination of several products and processes helped to raise the visibility and importance of investing in FP and enhanced the government capacity to generate and use evidence in decision making. For example, the MOH's planning department is now able to use the evidence it generates to explain why FP is important in its negotiations on budget allocation with the Ministry of Finance (MoF) as well as to remind the government of the FP commitments it made in 2012.

In response to the government's FP 2020 commitment to increase the allocation for FP commodities in the national health budget, the MoF has promised that it will significantly increase the FP commodity budget every year. To honour this commitment, the MoF increased the FP commodity budget by 137% from MK200 million in FY2021/22 to MK475 million in FY2022/23.

"FP commodity security is now regarded as a priority in the MoH. WISH2ACTION helped to raise the visibility of FP in government planning. The FP commodity budget line is now receiving a substantial increment, up to 137% in FY2022/2023. This has never happened since the budget was created in 2013. This is because of evidence that WISH2ACTION helped to generate."

Dr Kachale, Director of the Reproductive Health Directorate

In collaboration with other FP Partners – Palladium, Care Malawi, MANASO, FPAM and White Ribbon Alliance, WISH lead on developing and using evidence to advocate with Members of Parliament (MPs), MoF and the media to build a strong case on FP commodity budget security using political and public routes. For this purpose, Options and Manasao jointly presented the investment case to Members of Parliament during the budget session in FY2020/21.

### 2 Stakeholder engagement and involvement increases cohesion and buy-in to recommendations

Packaging messages to raise awareness of issues and identifying appropriate channels for reaching different audiences is a significant step in ensuring successful advocacy. WISH and Manasao worked in collaboration with other FP partners to engage MPs, the media and other CSOs in raising awareness of the challenges caused by lengthy payment and procurement processes, calling on the MoH to take serious and urgent actions to resolve them. Engaging these stakeholders also helped foster a better working relationship between MoH, MoF and MPs, MANASO and MoH's Planning Department.

“MANASO is now seen as a real partner and invited to make contributions in various fora i.e., Full Councils meetings, DIPs, National budget sessions. The Affiliates in Kasungu and Lilongwe have been incorporated as DIP members where they are able to engage the Council during planning and budget development process”

Vincent Ngosi, MANASO Technical Officer

This work also filtered down to the two WISH districts of Kasungu and Lilongwe through Manaso, who has a vast national network and engaged stakeholders during Full Council<sup>2</sup> meetings. These district forums were used to raise awareness of FP commodity stock outs, lack of funds for FP supervision and unavailability of FP allocation in the District Implementation Plans (DIPs). A Member of Parliament for Kasungu District, who doubles up as the Minister of Health, reiterated these challenges. The districts also ensured that fuel funds were made available to FP supervision teams.



### 3 National leadership and ownership of processes for identifying and solving emerging challenges is a key driver to successful outcomes

Actively engaging with the GOM has been of vital importance to leading implementation of recommended solutions, since the start of the programme. For that reason, WISH has worked together with the RHD to collectively design relevant interventions to identify and address capacity gaps in public sector investments in FP/SRH. While the RHD demonstrated capacity in general technical service delivery, there were gaps in providing oversight for planning, allocating and utilising FP budgets. On the other hand, the programme's accountability partner, Manaso, also demonstrated gaps in holding the government's MoH to account for fulfilling its FP commitments.

To address these gaps, WISH conducted a joint capacity building session for the RHD, MANASO and Planning Department on budget monitoring and tracking. As a result, the RHD and MANASO were able to track the FP budget for FY2021 and FY2021/22 and successfully advocate for an early release and expenditure of the budgets in FY2021/22, whilst influencing the MOH to procure FP commodities through UNFPA to ensure timeliness and cost-effectiveness.

2. The full councils are equivalent of Parliament at local level. They pass bye laws and approval district budgets before they are consolidated at central level. They are headed by Chairperson who are elected councillors. MPs and Interest group representatives i.e., youth, HIV are Ex-officials

## 4 Applying systems thinking approaches to budget advocacy facilitates multifaceted interactions and relationships that catalyse consensus building for accountability

WISH's bottleneck analysis process revealed the interconnections between the departments within the MoH as well as the importance of functional relationships between MoH, MoF and CMST in financing and procuring FP commodities.

"The WISH2ACTION stakeholder engagement approach helped to foster good relationship between MoH and Members of Parliament, and between MoH and Ministry of Finance."

Gladstone Mchoma, Economist at the MoH

Proper coordination of multi-sectoral consultations with a clear and focussed agenda facilitates fruitful interactions and deliberations between these stakeholders. Navigating each of the sectors individually and pulling them together on a unified agenda requires well packaged messaging, advocacy tactics, and negotiation skills to achieve buy-in from parliamentarians, government agencies, CSOs, implementing and development partners. WISH worked together with MANASO, the accountability mechanism to coordinate the multi- sectoral consultations, through evidence briefings, and the above-mentioned approaches to build consensus that led to a successful outcome in resolving the gaps in the FP commodity payment and procurement process by adopting alternative procurement method through UNFPA.

Specifically, using the same approaches, the strengthened relationship between the MoH, CMST, and the MoF facilitated a unified front in identifying the gaps and finding solutions to resolve the delays in the procurement and payment procedures for FP commodities. The analysis undertaken in a collaborative manner with all the players demonstrates the important role each entity plays in resolving a challenge that could ordinarily be seen as a problem of the MoH or CMST alone. The important lesson here is to recognize that implementing partners have a role to play in catalysing change through working together to constructively isolate the challenges without ignoring the complex context that surrounds entities like the MoH, MoF and the CMST.

## Challenges

- While WISH has supported advocacy and achieved consistent increase in budget allocation for FP/SRH, there continues to be significant reliance on development partners to fund FP commodity supplies.
- Lengthy and non-streamlined procurement systems via CMST lead to the government not spending and losing FP funds. This is why the WISH programme has helped broker arrangements for procurement to be channelled through UNFPA.
- The work of accountability mechanisms such as Manaso is limited due to lack of direct funding. WISH supported Manaso to develop an advocacy strategy that they can use to raise funds to support their activities in the future. Also, the government could support CSO involvement in planning and advocacy.

## Conclusions and recommendations

WISH2ACTION explored alternative approaches and practices for improving

public sector investments for FP/SRH in Malawi, which could be applied to other low and middle-income countries:

- Undertake political economy analysis to map out politically nuanced gaps in financing health programs, to guide the design of relevant interventions.
- Generate the evidence and promote its use in advocacy and accountability.
- Support CSOs to mobilise resources through direct funding from donors and negotiating with the government to support their advocacy and accountability activities.
- Engage and involve stakeholders such as the media and communities in budget advocacy to enhance consensus building and transparency.

- Build the capacity of MoH's Reproductive Health and Planning Directorates to take leadership and ownership in identifying and solving emerging challenges, such as delay in commodity distribution, accurate reporting and efficient funds utilization as planned.
- Engage CSOs as partners in addressing accountability and advocacy gaps
- Use systems thinking approaches to address multifaceted interactions and relationships to enhance effective resource mobilisation, utilisation, and accountability.

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## References

1. WISH (2020), Mapping of family planning commodities in Malawi report
  2. Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development (2020), 2020/21 Budget Statement Book
  3. Ministry of Health (2020), National Health Accounts
  4. Ministry of Health (2020), Operational Budget template
  5. Ministry of Health (2021) Family Planning Commodity, Budget Tracking Tool Guide
  6. WISH (2020), FP/SRHR investment case brief
  7. WISH (2020), Mapping of family planning commodities in Malawi report
  8. WISH (2019), Health financing contextual analysis
- i. Accountability mechanisms are multi-stakeholder groups working in partnership with WISH program to bring together officials from different ministries and civil society representatives, which may also include implementing partners and advocates. They have different structures and names in different countries
  - ii. Pathway of change is an adaptive programming tool that ensures innovative flexibility in implementation of complex programs like the WISH2Action program.
  - iii. Delays in raising procurement requests; poor coordination between Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Health and medical supply agencies causing extensive delays in processing procurement, payments and distribution; inadequate skills in handling the Logistics Management Information System (LMIS), leading to poor management and tracking of FP/SRH commodities from procurement request, purchase, distribution and utilization; and challenges in the last mile distribution of SRH/FP commodities leading to stock out at the point of service delivery.



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