

Parliamentarians in Malawi Advance the Family Planning Agenda

With an annual population growth rate of 3.2 percent and a total fertility rate of nearly six children per women, Malawi has one of the fastest-growing populations in Africa. This rapid pace of growth not only affects families, but poses a substantial burden on Malawi's government and economy to provide more services. To manage population growth, it is important to build support and identify champions for family planning and reproductive health (FP/RH) beyond the health sector, particularly among Members of Parliament (MPs), whose decisions affect program funding and policies. In response, the Health Policy Project (HPP), is building the capacity of parliamentarians in Malawi to advocate for greater investment in family planning.



Women MPs attend an HPP-supported advocacy workshop in Kampala, August 2012.
Photo by Eddie Sejjoba

To identify strategies for implementing commitments to key population and family planning policy issues, HPP organized a high-level policy dialogue meeting under the auspices of the Southern and Eastern Africa Parliamentary Committees on Health (SEAPACOH) in September 2011. During this meeting, parliamentary delegates from Malawi committed to achieving four priority actions by 2015, including the establishment of a budget line item for family planning. Over the next year, HPP worked to hold parliamentarians accountable for their commitments and build their capacity to advocate for a budget line item for family planning.

Increasing the Capacity of Women MPs to Advocate for FP/RH

To support implementation of the commitments made at the 2011 SEAPACOH meeting, as well as to increase the voice of women MPs and existing FP/RH champions, HPP conducted a regional advocacy training for women parliamentarians on August 27-28, 2012, in Kampala, Uganda—just prior to the 2012 SEAPACOH meeting held August 29-31. Twenty-two women parliamentarians from four countries were trained, including four from Malawi. During a highly participatory skills-building session, the women MPs developed personal advocacy strategies with individual activities to strengthen FP budgeting.

Preparation Meeting for Malawian Women MPs. HPP organized a briefing meeting on July 31 for the four women MPs who would later attend the Kampala workshop. The main objectives of this meeting were to link the women MPs with existing FP/RH champions and networks representing civil society and government in Malawi; brief the MPs on the current Malawi population and FP/RH landscape; and discuss the role of women MPs in affecting policy change on these issues.

According to attendees, the Lilongwe meeting was a success. There was fruitful dialogue among the women MPs and FP champions, and the MPs were empowered to confidently talk about FP/RH and effectively contribute to the regional dialogue in Kampala. The MPs committed to join the women champions and help advocate for FP/RH financing with fellow parliamentarians, as well as the ministers of health and finance.

Women's Advocacy Workshop. During the advocacy workshop in Kampala, HPP assisted the four Malawian MPs to develop a presentation highlighting Malawi's successes in FP/RH, challenges faced by government of Malawi, and the role of the parliamentarians in addressing FP/RH. The presentation generated debate among the women MPs from the other countries. Participants were particularly interested in learning about the best practices that contributed to increasing Malawi's contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) from 28 percent in 2004 to 46 percent in 2010. Malawi MPs attributed the rise in CPR to the liberalization of policies and scale-up of community initiatives, especially allowing community workers to provide injectable

contraceptives at the community level—an initiative that Futures Group directly contributed to under the USAID-funded Community-Based Family Planning and HIV Services (CFPHS) project.



Malawi delegates develop action plans at the August 2012 women parliamentarians advocacy workshop. Photo by Eddie Sejjoba

In addition, the advocacy workshop enabled the women parliamentarians from Malawi to develop specific and actionable objectives for achieving contraceptive security—specifically, for securing a budget line item for contraceptives. Using their new understanding of policy and advocacy concepts, the Malawi delegation developed individual action plans, within which each member identified specific activities she could implement to contribute to achieving this objective. Their plans include activities such as briefing the Women Caucus committee and the chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Health, and personal meetings with the Minister of Finance and Minister of Health to lobby for the establishment of a budget line for FP—a level of engagement for which MPs are ideally positioned. During the larger SEAPACOH meeting on August 29-31, the women MPs were joined by colleagues from 14 countries across Africa and their plans became a central piece of the Malawi delegation's national commitments, including a pledge to increase government funding for FP, in line with pledges at the recent London Summit on Family Planning.

Next Steps

HPP national and regional partners will regularly follow up with MPs to review the status of their commitments and monitor progress against the action plans developed in Kampala. HPP will also identify opportunities to establish and strengthen linkages among the MPs and other FP champions, as well as other sectors involved with managing population growth, including the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development. In addition, HPP will support women MPs to establish a social network for the meeting participants to continue to share best practices. The women MPs' increased recognition that population growth is a crucial issue requiring action across all sectors signals new opportunities to build stronger national commitment to population and development issues.

The USAID-funded Health Policy Project (HPP) builds capacity around the world for improved health policy, advocacy, and governance. HPP contributes to improved health outcomes through strengthening the efficiency, effectiveness, and equity of health systems. It is implemented by Futures Group, in collaboration with the Centre for Development and Population Activities, Futures Institute, Partners in Population and Development – Africa Regional Office, Population reference Bureau, RTI International, and the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood. For more information, please visit www.healthpolicyproject.com or contact info@healthpolicyproject.com