

An Assessment of Family Planning Decision Makers' And Advocates' Needs and Strategies In Three East African Countries

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CONTEXT: Despite decades of evidence-based advocacy for family planning in developing countries, research on how decision makers perceive and respond to such efforts is lacking.

METHODS: A literature review yielded 10 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1999 and 2012 on decision makers' needs for and experiences with health advocacy and evidence. Two sets of questions about family planning research and advocacy—one for decision makers and another for advocates—were developed from emerging themes and used in structured interviews with 68 key informants in Ethiopia, Kenya and Malawi.

RESULTS: Decision makers reported understanding family planning's value and confirmed that advocacy had helped to spur recent favorable shifts in government support of family planning. Key informants stressed that advocacy messages and formats must be tailored to the needs and interests of particular audiences to be effective. Messages must also consider barriers to decision makers' support for family planning: constituents' negative attitudes; fear that increased adherence to family planning will shrink the size and influence of specific voting blocs and ethnic groups; and competing economic, social, cultural, religious and political priorities. Decision makers reported valuing the contributions of international family planning organizations and donors, but were more comfortable receiving advocacy messages from local sources.

CONCLUSIONS: According to decision makers, sustained and strategic family planning advocacy developed and delivered by culturally attuned national actors, with support from international actors, can diminish barriers to government support for family planning.

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Despite global and national efforts to promote consultation between decision makers and public health researchers,¹ and to include stakeholders in research processes, empirical studies on the influence of health research findings on the knowledge, attitudes and actions of decision makers—especially in developing countries—are scant.² Likewise, few systematic studies have been conducted to examine how decision makers view advocacy, how they use public health research findings and advocacy, what types of research and advocacy they consider persuasive, and how and why they choose to support policies indicated by research.³ Findings from those studies suggest that many advocates who strive to help decision makers use research findings to inform health policy fail to adequately consider political realities or to present advocacy messages in a persuasive package.^{2–6} In low-income countries, decision makers are further hampered in connecting health research to policy by weak health systems, lack of professional regulation and poor access to evidence.⁷

To our knowledge, no studies have specifically investigated decision makers' views on and use of family planning research and advocacy. Thus, under the Health Policy Project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), we conducted a qualitative study of how parliamentarians, government officials and their technical

advisors in three East African countries—Ethiopia, Kenya and Malawi—make decisions related to family planning, what types of evidence they find compelling, what other factors compete with research evidence to influence their decision making and what advocacy approaches are most effective. We chose the three countries because of the progress their governments have made in strengthening family planning programs: Modern contraceptive use has risen substantially among married women in each in recent decades (Ethiopia, from 6% in 2000 to 29% in 2011;^{10,11} Malawi, from 7% in 1992 to 42% in 2010;^{12,13} and Kenya, from 18% in 1989 to 39% in 2008–2009^{14,15}). In addition, the countries were selected because both the African Institute for Development Policy and Health Policy Project/Futures Group had conducted or were currently conducting work on family planning and reproductive health there and, thus, had access to contacts. Research findings from these countries may provide valuable lessons for evidence-informed family planning advocacy elsewhere.

METHODS

Literature Review

We began by searching PubMed and Google Scholar to identify peer-reviewed journal articles from 1999–2012 related to decision makers' needs and experiences with

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