

Communication for Better Coordination of Family Planning Programs: The Rivers Experience

Authored by: Uduak Ananaba, Rivers State TCI State Program Coordinator, April 2019



Net-mapping exercise in Rivers State

Background

Creating an enabling policy environment is critical to the success of any health program, including family planning programming. Strengthening communication and coordination platforms among key stakeholders and policy makers is key to creating an enabling policy environment in which government can effectively lead and manage the diverse partners that contribute to the health program. With its “business unusual” approach to the scale-up of proven-to-work family planning interventions, the Challenge Initiative (TCI) commenced program implementation in Rivers State in July 2018, first supporting the State to identify and address program implementation bottlenecks, mobilize resources and facilitate investments in family planning. This was achieved through the use of a net-map exercise, an interview-based mapping tool that helps people understand, visualize, discuss, and improve situations in which many different actors influence outcomes. In addition, the net-map exercise helped to identify key policy interventions and improve and coordinate multi-stakeholder governance by collectively identifying key actors in family planning programming, their level of influence and the flow of resources and information related to family planning programming.

Interventions

Findings from the net-map exercise conducted in Rivers State revealed an almost non-existent or very weak family planning program communication among the State Ministry of Health (SMOH) and Primary Health Care Management Board (PHCMB) and weak coordination among implementing

partners implementing family planning interventions in the State. As a result of these findings, TCI identified the following strategies to improve and strengthen program-related communication between SMOH and PHCMG and facilitate government-instituted family planning coordination mechanisms:

- Advocate for and facilitate two joint roundtable program and financial feedback meetings between SMOH and PHCMG, using TCI's novel performance-based tracker to elicit discussions; both meetings have been chaired by the Honorable Commissioner for Health.
- Establish and use an email listserv with relevant policy makers and technocrats enlisted.
- Embed TCI technical coaches within the State structure to ensue communication at program manager/officer level, not just technocratic level.
- Strategically engage the State and ensure that TCI is part of discussions with Saving One Million Lives (SOML) to advocate for coordination of family planning programs with implementing partners; this includes TCI's participation in SOML's Technical Core Group meeting and Steering Committee.
- Ensure TCI is included in other existing health programs platform – Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (MNCH) Core Technical Committee meetings and State Task Force meetings) – and use them as a platform for strengthening integration and coordination of activities.
- Facilitate advocacy visits by the Family Planning Advocacy Working Group (FPAWG) to key stakeholders to encourage the State to establish a family planning coordinating platform or forum, which did not exist before and was a gap identified during the net-map exercise.

These strategies stirred program-related communication among policy makers and technocrats and, as a result, coordination of family planning interventions and partners improved.

Results

These strategies were deployed between September 2018 and March 2019 to improve communication and facilitate government's ability to better coordinate its family planning program using existing platforms. The following were notable outputs and lessons:

- Roundtable program and financial feedback meetings with policy makers using the TCI's novel performance-based tracker strengthened not only communication but also demonstrated TCI's transparency in its engagement with the State and, as a result, garnered greater commitment and transparency by policy makers in return.
- Mapping and strategically engaging in already established State meetings and fora helped to ensure implementing partners' support for government-instituted family planning coordination platform.
- TCI-supported FPAWG advocacy visits helped to ensure the establishment and institutionalization of the family planning implementing partners coordinating platform.

Presently, there is a general shift in mindset and cordial program-related communication observed among government staff and policy makers. An inaugural family planning partners coordination meeting was conducted in April 2019, which resulted in the development of a consolidated family planning workplan that will ensure a better coordinated family planning program throughout the State and not just related to TCI-supported local government areas.

In order to ensure that TCI's advocacy efforts reach beyond the policy makers and implementing partners, TCI has provided Rivers State with technical support to adopt and replicate NURHI/TCI media strategies for a State-wide media campaign for all health programs.

Conclusion

TCI will continue to facilitate program and financial feedback sessions using its novel performance-based tracker to help sustain the improved communication and commitment to family planning programming between SMOH and PHCMG. In addition, the State-wide family planning workplan will set the tone for partners in the family planning space to regularly provide feedback to government as a way of strengthening communication, improving the coordination of limited resources, and ultimately leading to better outcomes that can be sustained by the government.