

Improved Coordination of Family Planning Partners in Rivers State Yields Positive Results

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Snapshot of the inaugural FP coordination meeting

Coordination as a development approach is pertinent for all institutions, including government, nongovernmental organizations (also referred to as implementing partners) and civil society organizations (CSOs). It improves operational efficiency and prevents duplication of efforts. Government and implementing partners alike enjoy economies of scale and organizational effectiveness when coordination efforts are prioritized and implemented. Coordination is, or at least should be, an active component of all public health programs, including family planning programs, given that they contribute to improved service delivery and uptake of health services in a particular geography. Therefore, strengthening coordination platforms and efforts is crucial for better program outputs and results.

The Challenge Initiative (TCI) recognizes and prioritizes coordination as integral in implementing its Business Unusual model which supports State-driven ownership and participation; promotes resource sustainability; provides technical support in the form of coaching; and facilitates sharing and learning for scale.

Between 2018 and 2019, Rivers State Government specifically its Family Planning (FP) Unit experienced a surge in the number of family planning implementing partners and civil society organizations now operating in Rivers. It became urgent and necessary for Rivers State Government to establish coordination platforms that would guide the six implementing partners and four CSOs implementing family planning programs in the State. When TCI began implementation in Rivers in July 2018, it observed weak coordination of the family planning program and partners. The net-map, which is a diagnostic tool used at the formative stage of the TCI program, highlighted poor coordination as a gap among others. As a result, TCI identified a set of strategies to strengthen coordination within a year's time.

To foster better coordination as a means to achieving better outputs, the following strategies were deployed:

- Advocacy visits by Family Planning Advocacy Working Group (FPAWG) to key stakeholders to push for the establishment of a FP coordination platform – a regularly scheduled meeting for government, implementing partners and CSOs to come together to plan and coordinate activities.
- Provision of technical assistance and coaching support to the FP unit by developing costed concept notes for coordination platform and stimulated discussion on the need to urgently implement the coordination meetings.
- Support to the FP Unit by pioneering discussions about the development of an integrated State-Wide FP Workplan as a key priority activity to be undertaken by all during the inaugural coordination meeting
- Advocacy visits to policy makers, including the Honorable Commissioner for Health (HCH) and Permanent Secretaries, for buy into the integrated State-Wide FP Workplan, which resulted in HCH signing invitation letters requesting all partners to be part of the development process.
- Support to the State to coordinate partners and program activities during the TCI state tours and program review week.

These strategies were deployed between December 2018 and April 2019 and resulted in the following:

- A one-day coordination meeting of all family planning implementing partners and CSOs conducted and decision made by the Government to facilitate the coordination meeting quarterly.
- Decision to review the Family Planning Costed Implementation Plan (CIP) during the development of the integrated State-Wide FP Workplan.
- Development of a one-year State-Wide FP Workplan that includes activities of government, all implementing partners and CSOs.
- Improved ownership of the FP program by Government and partners.
- Improved overall outlook of what could be achieved in 2019 with the integrated State-Wide FP Workplan compared to what took place in 2018.

The Director of Public Health and Disease Control Services at the State Ministry of Health explained the significance of these strategies taken by TCI, *“...Coordination is the critical factor in service delivery. In the network of IPs [implementing partners], stakeholders and government policy makers in the FP space, this exercise is crucial. It is akin to having an articulate and talented orchestra guided by the conductor with an adaptable song manual. TCI has done well in this regard. The FP IPs coordination platform is best practice extraordinary and we are excited to sustain this platform. The gains speak volumes in terms of eliminating duplicity and enhancing focused service delivery. This is a good time to have this happen and we are delighted to be a part of it.”* Implementing partner, Association for Reproductive and Family Health- RASuDiN, shared what the significance of this new approach means for her organization, *“...the coordination meeting helps eliminate duplication of efforts in terms of capacity building for State first line implementers.”*

Coordination may seem like a new brainer. However, it not only needs to be championed but also mindsets must change. All stakeholders need to see themselves as true partners, not competing, but working together to extend services to the most beneficiaries as possible.

“If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” - African proverb