Session 503: Policy Dialogue: Bridging Research, Practice, and Policy for Empowering Africa's Future

Title: Empowering local research institutions in West Africa: A baseline assessment of capacity building needs for advancing FP/RH and MNCH outcomes in Ouagadougou Partnership countries

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Background

The Ouagadougou Partnership's "Beyond 2020" agenda prioritizes research as a cornerstone for advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), emphasizing the critical role of evidence-based strategies in improving family planning/reproductive health (FP/RH) and maternal, newborn, and child health (MNCH). Despite this focus, local institutions in West Africa often encounter challenges in conducting impactful research due to capacity constraints. The "Agency for All" initiative aims to address these issues by strengthening the research and advocacy capacities of grantee organizations in the region. The vision of this two-year capacity building initiative is to support the Ouagadougou Partnership Coordination Unit (OPCU) Research Agenda and grantees through a co-created work plan to enhance the institutional and individual capacity of grantees to conduct research that will strengthen and generate new evidence on effective strategies to improve FP/RH and MNCH outcomes on the individual and community levels, and also lead knowledge application and research uptake efforts that will catalyze health-system strengthening and lead to improved cross-sector health outcomes. By providing comprehensive training, technical support, and resources on topics including core research skills, institutional development, partnership management, and research utilization, grantee organizations will have the procedures, structures and standards required to be recognized as credible research institutions able to independently conduct high-quality research and generate evidence-based solutions to local FP/MNCH challenges.

Thus, to design the initiative, Agency For developed a framework adapted from the Global Policy Advocacy (GPA) framework by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF)[1], which aims to understand organizations' institutional capacities and needs in four domains: i) Mobilizing funds and launching research, ii) Managing research partnerships and activities, iii) Conducting research, and iv) Research communication and utilization. The baseline capacity assessment aimed to identify opportunities and gaps in existing research and institutional competencies. The insights gathered will intend to inform the design and implementation of tailored capacity-strengthening activities, ultimately enhancing the research and advocacy capabilities of the grantee organizations.

Methods

The assessment study was designed using mixed-method research and conducted from October to November 2023, targeting the ten beneficiaries research institutions. This multifaceted assessment employed four tools to evaluate individual and organizational capacities: a research competency self-evaluation questionnaire, an organizational profile form, an organizational capacity assessment survey, and an in-depth interview guide. These tools were designed to measure competencies in leadership, management, strategic planning, administration, finance, partnerships, research, policy advocacy, and communications.

Data collection was carried out between October 9 to November 13, 2023. All assessment tools, except the in-depth interviews, were designed and conducted online using the SurveyCTO platform. The three online tools were self-administered, given the different geographic locations of the 10 grantee institutions. To guide the respondents, a guidance document was shared with them with detailed instructions on how to fill out the surveys. Self-administered data were regularly monitored in the SurveyCTO platform by members of the Sambodhi team to ensure quality and perform course corrections in case there were any discrepancies (i.e., using currencies consistently for funding and expenditure data). In-depth interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom conferencing software, with two research team members. Interviews were not recorded, but detailed notes were included in an interview debrief form. The duration of each interview ranged from 90 to 120 minutes.

All data analyses were conducted in Microsoft Excel software. The organizational capacity assessment tool and the self-evaluation survey had distinct scales to evaluate current capacities. The organizational capacity assessment tool scaled the quality of an organization's activity from 1 to 4 (1=poor; 2=moderately well; 3=well; 4=excels).

[1] Informing Advocacy and Communications Capacity Building Efforts BMGF-ORS Impact report (2019)

The self-evaluation survey asked respondents to score their abilities to perform activities across 14 areas associated with the research and policy advocacy life cycle on a scale of 1 to 7. A score of 1 implied that the respondent has "no skill at all" and a score of 7 implied that the respondent had an "excellent skill." The survey also consisted of qualitative questions to probe into the perceived capacity building needs of the research staff.

For the in-depth interviews, the responses from the interview debrief forms were tabulated on an Excel spreadsheet and later synthesized into two broad themes: 1) vision of the organization with respect to the evidence and policy landscape and 2) organizational capacity challenges.

Oral and written consent was obtained from the respondents prior to the interviews and online tool administration, respectively.

Results

The overall organization capacity comprised advocacy and communication approaches, work area specific action and behavior that would lead to effective communication strategy, and resources an organization is deploying for policy advocacy and strategic communications. the overall scores for the three aspects of organizational capacity—advocacy and communications approaches, organizational resources, and work area specific actions and behaviors—are less than 4 (excel) and 3 (well). This suggests that overall, individuals perceived that their organizations performed fairly "well" in terms of advocacy and communication, use of resources, and ways of working together. However, there are variabilities within each of these three aspects and their sub-components, which are further explored in sections below.

Organization-spceific research, policy and research capacity: This section highlights an analysis of an organization's capacity assessment across the three key aspects—advocacy and communications approaches, work area specific actions and behaviors, and organizational resources. each grantee organization's performance in advocacy and communications approaches, work area specific actions, and behaviors and organizational resources. In general, organizations' ratings varied—from "moderately well" to "well" and "excelling." No organization rated themselves as performing "poorly" in any area.

Organizational vision and areas of capacity building: This section explores aspects of the organization's vision as articulated by the senior leader during qualitative in-depth interviews. Understanding leadership perspectives about an organization's position within the larger policy and advocacy landscape was an important component of the in-depth interviews. Three key themes that emerged during interviews with organization leadership

included: 1) aspirations to become a "go-to" institution that could generate evidence for decision-makers; 2) the existence of already established partnerships and collaboration with government ministries and policymakers, and; 3) the important ways in which research and evidence utilization drove the mission and activities of organizations.

Individual Capacity Assessment: Participants rated themselves most highly on documentation and reporting, presentation of research findings, writing academic publications and proposal writing (scores > 5). The bottom four capacities had average scores of just above 4 (Moderate ability), including strategic communication, advocacy and relationship building, budgeting, and resource mobilization. These individual capacity gaps are broadly in line with the organizational capacity gaps with some variances. Overall, there was a unanimous perspective that the capacity building activities should focus thematically on the following: 1) institutional business development and management; 2) managing partnerships; 3) research communication and utilization, and 4) core research skills. As well, the respondents shared the following capacity strengthening strategies which, according to them, would lead to an impactful capacity building intervention: Trainings with practical and hands-on elements, capacity strengthening sessions at regular intervals to cover other staff members in addition to senior leadership, coaching and mentoring as a part of the capacity strengthening strategy, hybrid training opportunities that can cover other research staff in the organization, regular updates on workshops, conferences, webinars, and networking events to be shared with participants.

Conclusion

The baseline capacity assessment underscores the critical need for tailored capacity-building interventions to empower local research institutions in West Africa. By addressing the identified organizational and individual capacity gaps, the "Agency for All" initiative can significantly enhance the effectiveness of FP/RH and MNCH research and advocacy efforts in the region. The proposed interventions, including hands-on training and mentoring, are essential for fostering a robust research ecosystem capable of advancing SRHR outcomes. Collaborative workplan development with grantee organizations will be a pivotal next step, ensuring that capacity-building efforts are closely aligned with the unique needs and contexts of each institution.