

# Improving public sector investment in family planning in Malawi

How the Women's Integrated Sexual Health (WISH) programme increased visibility of the family planning budget and helped to raise domestic funding for family planning commodities

## Key learnings

The WISH2ACTION programme in Malawi played an important and catalytic role in the Government's decision to raise its allocation to the family planning commodity budget line in financial year 2020/21. It achieved this through:

- ① **Analysis:** synthesising existing analysis and undertaking new analysis, and developing the capacity and skills of WISH advocacy partner MANASO to use the information effectively
- ② **Advocacy:** tailoring the analysis to the needs of target audiences and identification of advocacy opportunities to ensure family planning financing remained in the public eye at crucial points during government discussions and budget negotiations
- ③ **Coordination:** coordinating a group of key FP/SRHR partners to 'speak with one voice'
- ④ **Building momentum:** activities progressively built understanding among key influencers and decision-makers on the challenges faced by young people in meeting their reproductive health needs, as well as by the country in meeting its FP/sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) commitments
- ⑤ **A flexible, health systems approach:** the flexible WISH framework and approach enabled the WISH Malawi team to take advantage of opportunities as they arose and to mobilise quickly when needed, thanks to a strong foundation of evidence-based analysis and relationship building with key FP/SRHR partners during 2019 and 2020

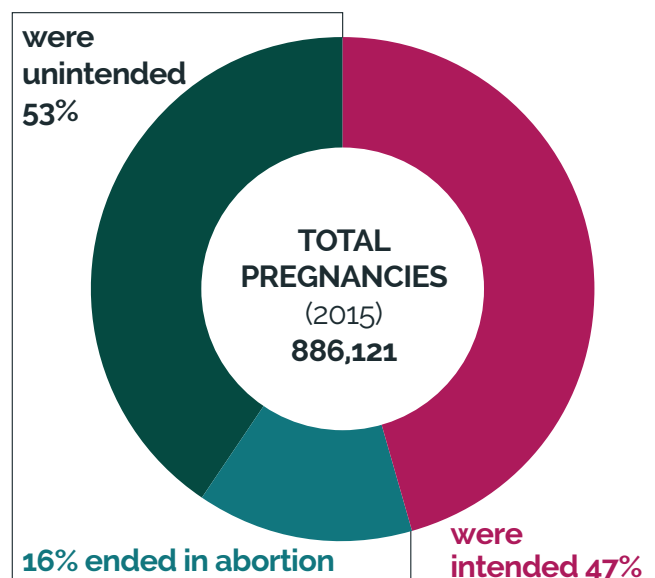
Despite the success of these efforts, there is no time for complacency. Domestic allocations to family planning remain low and activities must be maintained to support the government, both to manage current allocations more efficiently, and to increase overall government spending on health and family planning in future budgets.

## The challenge: weak domestic financing for family planning threatens progress towards universal access to FP/SRHR services in Malawi

Malawi faces serious challenges for the financing of its health sector. Although the government has increased domestic contributions to health each year - allocating nearly 10 percent of its total budget in 2018 which is a higher proportion than many neighbouring countries<sup>1</sup> - per capita health spending in real terms remains very low.<sup>2</sup> The government has limited fiscal space to raise additional revenues and international development partners continue to provide a high, but declining proportion of Malawi's health spending, placing additional pressure on households which must make up the difference or forego care.

In 1994, the government of Malawi recognised family planning as a human right at the Cairo International

Figure 1: Unplanned pregnancies and abortion in Malawi<sup>3</sup>



Conference on Population and Development, and has renewed its FP commitments many times since, as evidenced by the strong policy framework. In 2013/14, as a result of commitments made at the FP London summit (referred to as FP2020), the Malawi Government established a new budget line for FP commodities and has allocated an increasing level of funds to this line in each financial year. In 2017, the Govt re-committed to providing universal access to FP/SRHR services, and to increasing domestic financing as a means to achieve this. However, unmet need for family planning in Malawi remains stubbornly high, particularly among young people.<sup>4</sup>

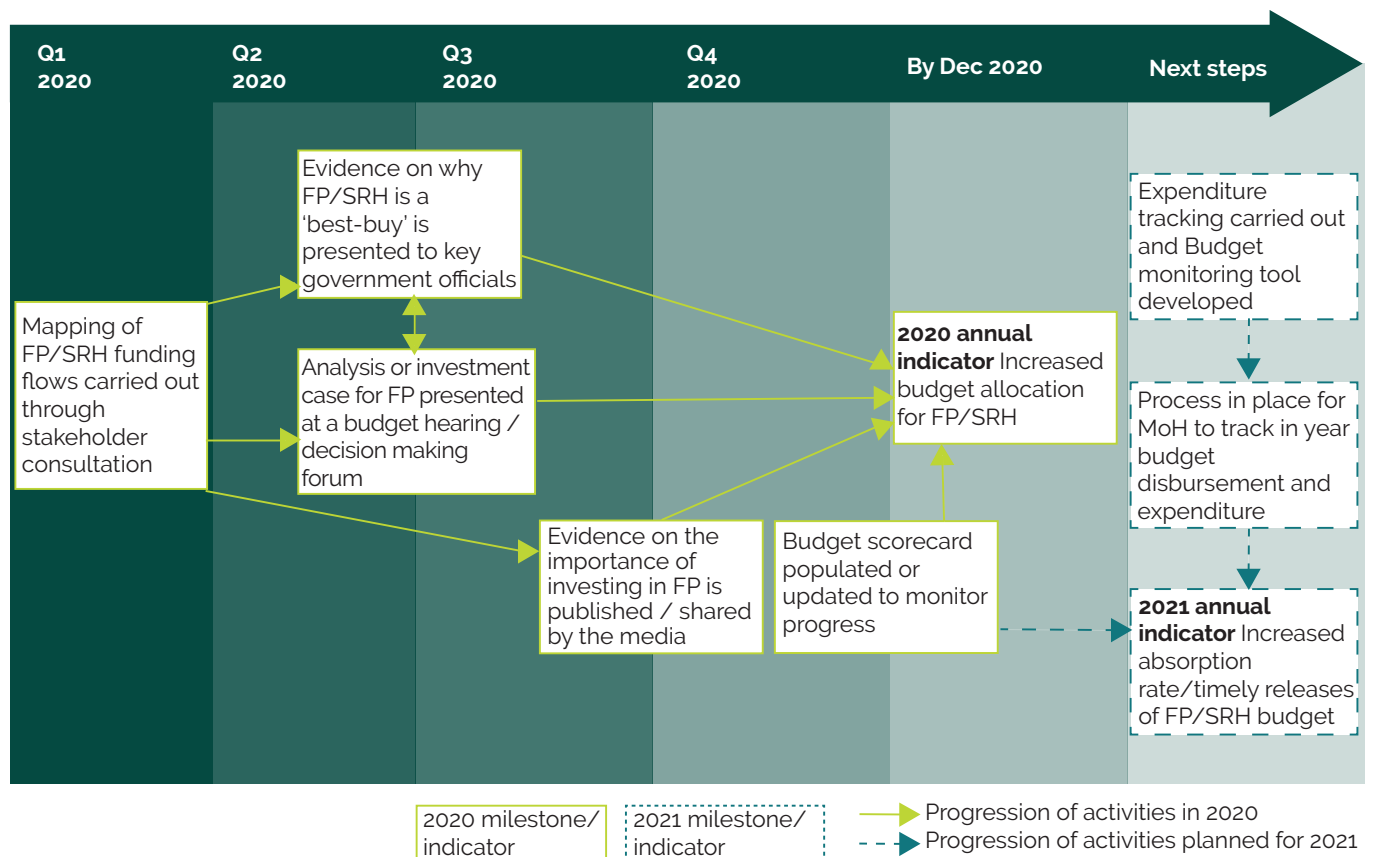
Foundational analysis undertaken by WISH Malawi points to challenges for the implementation of Malawi's FP/SRHR policies and strategies, and to low prioritisation of FP/SRHR in the national budget as an important bottleneck in establishing more sustainable financing for SRHR. In the financial year (FY) 2019/20, the government provided just 1.4 percent of total FP commodity financing needs, with development partners making up the substantial remainder.<sup>5</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has exerted considerable pressures on the health system and on government finances more broadly, and the Ministry of Finance proposed in May 2020 that it would reduce its contribution to FP commodities from the planned MK186 million to MK176 million.

Low levels of domestic financing combined with complex supply chain problems and issues with data quality have led to persistent stock outs of FP commodities, particularly at peripheral facilities situated far from district capitals. This is driving up unmet need for family planning and consequently unplanned pregnancies, a significant proportion of which end up in abortion (see figure 1).

### The response: budget analysis and targeted advocacy increase visibility of financing for family planning

Early research activities by the WISH Malawi team<sup>6</sup> pointed to: low levels of visibility over the FP commodity budget line outside the Reproductive Health Directorate of the Ministry of Health; a lack of documentation on how the funds are being utilised; and, little awareness of the extent to which development partners continue to finance Malawi's FP commodities, often with one-off contributions to meet demand at short notice. Furthermore, there is no disaggregation of data on funds for FP service delivery within the programme-based budget. This situation not only places Malawi's family planning financing on a highly unstable footing, it also has important implications for transparency and civil society engagement in family planning, making it difficult for non-government and civil society organisations to hold the government to account for the commitments made.

Figure 2: How WISH enabled an increase in domestic funding for FP commodities in Malawi



In the final year for the FP2020 global partnership, WISH Malawi set out to raise the visibility of family planning financing and to create an enabling environment in which key FP/SRHR partners and stakeholders could advocate for positive change.

In 2016, the Ministry of Finance undertook analysis using the ImpactNow<sup>7</sup> tool, clearly showing that investing in FP supports efforts to realise Malawi's demographic dividend.<sup>8</sup> Building on these data, the WISH Malawi team conducted a series of further analyses, reviewing the global literature on the return on investment for family planning, mapping the flow of FP funds and commodities through Malawi's health system, and looking at the efficiency of financial management systems at central and sub-national levels. The analysis also attempted to identify the FP commodity financing gap.

WISH Malawi worked with the advocacy platform MANASO to select target audiences for the analysis - i.e. decision makers and those with influence over the budget for health and family planning, and those able to hold the government to account for commitments made. Suitable entry points for advocacy were identified and the information was tailored to the specific role and needs of the different target audiences.

**Figure 3: Making the case for investing in family planning in Malawi**



With responsibility for priority setting across the health sector and for negotiating with the Ministry of Finance on budget ceilings, the Ministry of Health

was a clear target audience, as was the Ministry of Finance with overall responsibility for the national budget. In response to requests published in the media for comments on the proposed budget, WISH and MANASO made two separate submissions to the Ministry of Finance calling for additional funding for family planning and a more timely release of funds to support efficiencies in commodity procurement. These submissions were concise, evidenced-based documents, focusing on the economic rationale and financial return on FP investment, and the potential for reducing the pressure on Malawi's health system and spending, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**An investment case brief** was developed for use by advocacy organisations including MANASO, which highlights a broader set of social and economic rationales for investing in family planning, including the potential to save women and children's lives, and to support girls' education and participation of women in the workforce. The Investment Case underlines the links between fulfilling the reproductive rights of Malawians and the country's ability to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals - particularly Universal Health Coverage. In the context of the global pandemic, the Investment Case also highlights the potential of FP investment to support Malawi's post-COVID economic recovery (see Figure 3).

The advent of a new government in Malawi halfway through the financial year, and the need to revise the national budget, provided further opportunities for advocacy, with parliamentary committee meetings scheduled prior to the budget negotiations. A presentation was made at the Parliamentary Family Planning Commodities Budget Advocacy Meeting, organised by MANASO, where the Parliamentary Committees on Health, Budget & Finance, HIV/AIDS and Women Caucus were all present. The aim was to remind Members of Parliament (MPs) of the government's commitments in the final year of the FP2020 global partnership, to inform them about the importance of investing in family planning, and to convince them of the need to increase government spending.

MPs are a powerful group in Malawi with considerable influence over priority setting for the government. Having successfully convinced many of the MPs present at the high-level meeting, and knowing that Malawi's MPs are avid readers of the national press, the WISH Malawi team followed up with a hard hitting piece in two national daily newspapers. The article was timed to come out on two consecutive mornings of the budget negotiation meetings in September 2020. The two newspapers have the widest readership in the country, and therefore channelled key advocacy messages to a wide audience.

In addition to conducting the above analyses, Options coordinated and led a group of FP/SRHR stakeholders,

including WISH partners MANASO and FPAM, and development partners HP Plus, White Ribbon Alliance, AMREF and Care Malawi. These organisations, comprising some of the principal actors in FP/SRHR in Malawi, lent their weight to the press article.

## The results: an increase in Government of Malawi financing for FP commodities in the 2020-2021 national budget

These efforts were ultimately successful: instead of the planned reduction in the FP commodity budget line for FY 2020/21 to MK176 million, the FP commodity budget line was increased to MK200 million for FY 2020/21. While this amount fell short of the MK250 million requested by the Reproductive Health Directorate, and remains very small in comparison with FP commodity financing needs, it nonetheless represents an increase of 7.5% on the FY 2019/20 budget at a time when all government budget lines are under considerable downward pressure. This decision sent a strong signal that investing in FP is important, particularly during the final year of FP2020.

## What learning can be identified?

Looking back over the year, WISH Malawi played an important and catalytic role, synthesising and undertaking analyses, developing the capacity and skills of advocacy partner MANASO to present key messages effectively, and leading and coordinating a group of key FP/SRHR partners to ensure that the group 'sings with one voice' to maximum effect.

This collaborative approach ensured synergies both between the group of FP/SRHR collaborating organisations and between the WISH workstreams for Health Financing and Evidence and Accountability. This builds on work undertaken during 2019 to develop strong working relationships with government stakeholders, particularly directorates of Reproductive Health and Planning and Policy Development in

the Ministry of Health, and with non-government organisations and international development partners.

Careful selection of audiences and identification of advocacy opportunities ensured that this topic remained in the public eye at crucial points during the budget negotiations. The flexible WISH framework and approach enabled the WISH team to take advantage of opportunities as they arose and to mobilise quickly when needed.

The activities described progressively built understanding among key influencers and decision-makers on the challenges faced by women in meeting their reproductive health needs, as well as by the country in meeting its FP/SRHR commitments. The benefits of increasing investments in family planning were clearly and creatively presented in easily digestible formats that were tailored to each target audience and advocacy opportunity.

## Next steps

Despite the success of the efforts described above, there is no time for complacency. The level of government funding allocated to family planning remains extremely small, particularly for family planning commodities.

Building on the achievements of 2020, WISH Malawi and MANASO will work with the Reproductive Health Directorate to develop simple tools for tracking and monitoring budget allocations to FP commodities and programmes and to advocate for the early release of these funds from the Treasury. This is particularly important given the long lead-in times for procurement of contraceptives from outside the country. A more efficient use of allocated funds will in turn support requests for additional funding. These efforts will place Malawi on a stronger footing when renewing national commitments for the successor to FP2020, as well as during negotiations for the national and district-level budgets for financial year 2021/22.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.GHED.GE.ZS?locations=MW-TZ-UG-ZM>.
- <sup>2</sup> Ministry of Health (MOH). 2020. Malawi National Health Accounts Report for Fiscal Year 2019 – 2020. Lilongwe, Malawi: Ministry of Health, Department of Planning and Policy Development
- <sup>3</sup> Polis CB, Mhango C, Philbin J, Chimwaza W, Chipeta E, Msusa A (2017) Incidence of induced abortion in Malawi, 2015. PLoS ONE 12(4): e0173639.
- <sup>4</sup> <http://track20.org/Malawi>
- <sup>5</sup> WISH2ACTION 2020. Mapping of family planning commodities in Malawi. May 2020.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, an up-dated landscape analysis of family planning policies, strategies and financing (WISH2ACTION 2020: Health Financing Contextual Analysis in Malawi); and a political economy analysis (WISH2ACTION 2018: Malawi Political Economy Analysis).
- <sup>7</sup> ImpactNow was adapted from Marie Stopes International's Impact 2 in collaboration with the Health Policy Project
- <sup>8</sup> Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development (2016), Harnessing the demographic dividend to accelerate socio-economic transformation and economic development in Malawi.