

Engaging the Private Sector

Why engage the private sector?

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a vital role in improving the health of women and children, raising the status of women, and achieving community development goals. NGOs are well positioned to address controversial topics and the needs of vulnerable groups. Many work in remote areas where government services either do not exist or are thin. The mandate of NGOs is often to address gaps in government programming and to reach underserved groups such as sex workers, people living with HIV/AIDS, sexually active youth, and refugee and displaced populations, expanding coverage to those who need it the most. In national coalitions, NGOs are effective advocates for policy change, especially as it affects their constituent populations.

Commercial businesses

Addressing the family planning needs of women and men in the 21st century will require enormous expansion of the services. The commercial sector can play a major role in this expansion. By upholding the values of corporate social responsibility (CSR), businesses concerned about their impact on society demonstrate their commitment to sustainable economic development by working with their employees, their families, and the local community to improve lives in ways that are good for business and for development.¹ The business community can have a significant role in promoting good health and well-being, especially if innovative CSR initiatives are undertaken in partnership with the government and civil society.² For example, partnerships with the corporate sector are helping to extend family planning and reproductive health programmes and commodity security through work-

market-, and community-based initiatives in Africa and around the globe.

Goal of this brief

This brief aims to foster partnerships among a broad range of private sector entities to improve access, availability, and quality of family planning services.

Identifying private sector partners

NGOs were the earliest promoters of family planning in sub-Saharan Africa and many of them still play key roles today.³ In addition to encouraging NGOs that have traditionally promoted family planning to continue their good work, family planning advocates can engage new categories of NGOs in activities such as advocacy, education, and service provision, and expand the network to include a wider range of NGOs such as those involved in:

- health
- education and literacy
- development
- religious or charitable service
- youth, women's & men's groups
- agriculture
- micro-credit
- culture and arts
- sports

To encourage the commercial sector to contribute to family planning efforts, family planning advocates need to be creative in their approaches and target businesses and corporations such as:

- pharmaceutical companies
- industries
- employer-based health services
- social marketing agencies
- banks
- oil companies
- media corporations
- breweries

Why should the private sector care about family planning?

Since both NGOs and socially responsible corporations aim to improve the well-being of their constituents, they are likely to care about an intervention that provides health, social, and economic benefits to the community they serve. Once NGOs and corporate leaders understand the range of benefits offered by family planning, they will be well placed to provide or promote it. The list below contains specific reasons as to why the private sector should support family planning and what they can achieve if they take action:

- **Family planning saves lives.** While pregnancy and childbirth are natural, many pregnancies pose serious health risks for mothers and children, specifically those characterised as:
 - *Too early*—girls under 18 face a higher than normal risk of death or disability from pregnancy, and their babies face special health risks.
 - *Too many*—women who have many births are more likely to have problems with their later pregnancies, and face increased risk of death or disability, as do their newborns.
 - *Too late*—mothers over the age of 35 have a higher than normal risk of death or disability associated with childbirth and their babies are prone to more than normal problems.
 - *Too soon*—children spaced too closely have a higher risk of illness and death. Women should wait at least two years after giving birth before trying to become pregnant again. This interval increases infant and child survival and protects the health of the mother.

By supporting family planning, the private sector can help infants and women avoid these risks.

- **Family planning reduces abortions.** Family planning reduces the number of unintended pregnancies that may lead to abortion. Unsafe abortion accounts for 13% of global maternal deaths, and African women have the highest risk of

abortion-related deaths in the world.⁴ By supporting family planning, NGOs and corporate leaders will help to save women's lives.

- **Family planning helps prevent HIV/AIDS.** Integrating family planning into HIV/AIDS services helps women avoid unintended pregnancies, resulting in fewer HIV-positive babies born and fewer orphans. In addition, one family planning method—condoms—provides dual protection against both unintended pregnancies and HIV, as well as against other sexually transmitted infections.
- **Family planning reduces adolescent pregnancies and risk of sexually transmitted infections.** Adolescent pregnancy is a serious problem and it increases the risk of death for both the young mothers and their newborns. Children born to unmarried adolescent mothers generally fare less well than those born into households with adult parents. Adolescent pregnancies also cut short young women's education, closing off future opportunities. In addition, when teenagers have sex without using a condom, they increase their risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. By supporting comprehensive sexuality education and family planning services and supplies for the adolescents who need them, NGOs and private businesses can promote the health and well-being of young people.
- **Family planning empowers women.** Cultural and social norms limit women's decision-making ability and contribute to women's lower status. As a result, many women have little control over their sexual lives, a consequence of which is high numbers of unintended pregnancies and births. Early childbirth often forces girls to drop out of school, seriously limiting their future options. As the main caregivers, women with large numbers of children are less able to participate in community activities or contribute to the community's economic growth. By embracing efforts to make family planning education and services



available to all women of childbearing age, private sector organisations interested in community development will contribute significantly to raising the status of women—contributing to an upward spiral for the women and their communities.

- **Family planning improves children’s health and development.** Closely spaced, frequent births are often linked to poverty and overburdened families, which results in poor school performance—often owing to inadequate nutrition—and less parental attention to each child’s individual needs. Large families may not be able to afford schooling for all children. Supporting family planning to increase birth spacing and to reduce the family size will help private sector leaders make real impact in a community’s health and educational goals.
- **Family planning reduces costs for the private corporate sector.** By providing family planning services for employees, businesses and corporations can reap financial benefits such as reduction in medical costs associated with pregnancy and childbirth, staff taking maternity leave, and employee turnover, resulting in productivity gains. Likewise, supporting employee HIV/AIDS prevention programmes makes good sense because lowering prevalence of HIV/AIDS among the staff will ensure higher attendance, productivity, and profit, and lower medical and leave costs.

Box 1

The transformation of reproductive health services project: an effective government and NGO collaboration in South Africa

In the mid-1990s, after the collapse of apartheid in South Africa, Women’s Health Project (WHP), a women’s advocacy NGO, successfully partnered with the public health system to reorganise fragmented and inequitable health services so that comprehensive reproductive health services, including family planning, would be consistently available to all who needed them. Within the context of the government’s health reform programme, WHP took the lead in developing a properly functioning health system, providing comprehensive services in three poor rural provinces chosen by the government. With the full support and participation of public health officials, WHP led a participatory process with health-care workers and users to analyse problems in the system, identify solutions, and train staff to implement the solutions. After a pilot phase, staff met with provincial government leaders and key beneficiaries to review results and develop province-wide plans for reorganizing the services. An assessment after three years showed variation in the extent to which each province had implemented its plan, but all provinces were providing regular services identified as priorities by women: family planning, treatment of sexually transmitted infections, cervical cancer screening, and towards reducing the toll of unsafe abortion.⁵

- **Family planning promotes equity in the community.** Research shows that the poorest populations, people in refugee camps, internally displaced groups, persons with disabilities, and women in need of postabortion care often do not have access to or are not encouraged to take advantage of family planning services. Private sector leaders who help improve family planning access for these groups help improve equity in health and other social and economic benefits among all community members.

What can the private sector do to advance family planning?

■ NGOs

Because NGOs provide valued services for communities, they have great credibility with their clientele and significant influence over policy-makers. Their promotion of family planning services can be a powerful impetus for decision-makers to take action. The specific actions that NGO leaders could take include the following:

- Identify and document the needs of the NGO's constituents for family planning information and services.
- Inform the constituents about the benefits of family planning and where it is available, if it is not offered by the NGO.
- Integrate family planning advocacy and information into their activities, including outreach activities, and, if offering health services, directly provide family planning services or establish a referral network.
- Garner support of senior management, board of directors, and community representatives for family planning activities.
- Join or form a coalition of NGOs advocating for expanded availability and improved quality of family planning information and services.
- Advocate for supportive policies and expansion of high-quality services.
- Promote collaborative partnerships between public and private sectors and leverage resource allocations where possible.
- Advocate among national leadership for inclusion of family planning goals within all relevant

government programmes, including HIV/AIDS, maternal and children's health services, educational curriculum, and poverty alleviation activities.

- Unite with groups with opposing views about how family planning services are provided to develop messages and common solutions.
- Advocate among national leaders for inclusion of the goals and targets for family planning services in poverty reduction strategy papers, sectorwide approaches, and other multisectoral or multilateral plans.

■ Commercial sector

The commercial sector has the potential to help strengthen family planning and to help meet the ever burgeoning needs for these services. Here are ways in which this sector could get involved:

- Offer supportive workplace policies and include family planning in medical coverage.
- Provide family planning information, counselling, and services in employer-based health facilities.
- Promote private sector social marketing approaches to expand the distribution of family planning information and services.
- Provide free airtime or devote more print space to the topic of family planning and reproductive health through print and broadcast media organisations.
- Provide free informational messages or offer contraceptives and other reproductive health commodities at reduced or subsidized rates through pharmaceutical companies.

What do private sector groups need to advance family planning?

Providing information, tools, and other support to the private sector will enhance the likelihood of their taking action. Here are possible ways to support these potential partners:

- ✓ Provide data and information on the current status of family planning service delivery and reproductive health commodity security.
- ✓ Provide handouts, audiovisual aids, and summaries of persuasive research results to help potential private sector partners make the case for family planning with their staff and constituents.
- ✓ Orient private sector leaders on how family planning contributes to a range of health and development goals.
- ✓ Assist in linking up NGOs to form and maintain an effective NGO coalition.
- ✓ Assist in building partnerships or alliances between public and private sectors.
- ✓ Conduct cost-benefit analyses of family planning services to demonstrate expected financial and health benefits for businesses and the workforce.

References

The private sector is defined as (a) not-for-profit nongovernmental organisations, and (b) for-profit private business and corporate entities.

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