# MEASURE Evaluation's Small Grants for Family Planning

## Strengthening Research Capacity around the World

December 2019

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MEASURE Evaluation

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## Strengthening Research Capacity around the World

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**December 2019**

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- MEASURE Evaluation's knowledge management team, particularly William Frazier, who expertly edited the subgrantee research manuscripts and served as a writing mentor for the subgrantees
- Our 19 subgrantees, who worked to complete successful research projects and made the most of this opportunity

**Cover**

Staff of Africa Field Epidemiologic Network (AFENET), a MEASURE Evaluation subgrantee: from left to right, Mr. Olusegun Ricketts, Dr. Muhammadu Shakir Balogun, Mr. Olaseni Pinheiro, Dr. Olukemi Titilope Olugbade, Dr. Saheed Oluwatoyin Gidado, and Ms. Oluwayemisi Ishola. Photo: Courtesy of AFENET.

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# TABLES

# ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| AFENET | Africa Field Epidemiologic Network |
| ARFH | Association for Reproductive and Family Health |
| CEPHNS | Centre of Population, Health and Nutrition Services |
| EHAI | Equitable Health Access Initiative |
| FP | family planning |
| icddr,b | International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research |
| IHI | Integrated Health Initiative |
| IIHMR | Indian Institute of Health Management Research |
| IRB | institutional review board |
| LMIC | low- and middle-income country |
| NGO | nongovernmental organization |
| PI | principal investigator |
| PRH | population and reproductive health |
| RFA | request for applications |
| RH | reproductive health |
| RHIS | routine health information system(s) |
| TA | technical assistance |
| TRI-SS | The Rescue Initiative-South Sudan |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |
| ZAGO | Zambia Association of Gynaecology and Obstetrics |

# INTRODUCTION

Routine health information systems (RHIS) are essential for monitoring service-delivery programs at the national level in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Slattery, 2018). Increasing family planning (FP) uptake in LMICs requires a strong RHIS and sound data. In turn, good data management can increase stakeholder ownership and subsequently increase FP uptake (Ho & Wheeler, 2018). Unfortunately, several knowledge gaps disrupt this virtuous cycle: how to improve the quality of FP data, address barriers to integration of FP data in RHIS, and encourage analysis and use of the data to improve FP outcomes.

Expanding universal access to modern FP and improving reproductive health (RH) are longtime goals on the global agenda. The theme of the 2009 International Conference on Family Planning, "Universal Access to Family Planning," reflected these global priorities (2009). The conference's theme combined with a focus on research and best practices represent a clear call to build on the evidence base and best practices in FP research. Yet a decade later, opportunities to conduct this research are largely unattainable, both technically and financially, by those living in the very countries being studied. An analysis of authorship trends in *The Lancet Global Health* found that only 35 percent of the authors were from and worked within LMICs, but 92 percent of the articles addressed interventions in these countries (Lyer, 2018). The uneven distribution of health research capacity centered in the Global North undermines the ability of researchers in LMICs to generate scientific knowledge to address both global and local concerns (Bowsher, et al., 2019).

Small grants to in-country research groups are one mechanism to promote capacity and provide financial support for FP research conducted in LMICs. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Office of Population and Reproductive Health (PRH) has emphasized the importance of establishing a solid evidence base for programs and decision making; this is one of PRH's priorities for 2014–2020 (USAID, 2014). Not only does the small-grants activity generate evidence through secondary data collection and analysis, but also it supports the agency's Journey to Self-Reliance, which aims to strengthen local capacities (USAID, n.d.). The small-grants model creates sustainability by working through host-country institutions to research relevant FP issues, disseminate findings to local researchers, and help develop strategies for improvements.

## Background

The MEASURE Evaluation small-grants program began under the USAID-funded MEASURE Evaluation PRH Associate Award in 2009. Over the course of four years, 16 subagreements were signed with research organizations from 10 USAID FP/RH priority countries. In Phase IV of MEASURE Evaluation (2014–2020), the focus of the small grants moved from general FP research topics to the collection, analysis, and use of routine FP data. In this way, the Phase IV small grants contributed to the project's results framework (specifically to Result 1: "strengthen the collection, analysis, and use of routine health data") and maintained alignment with USAID's priorities and goals.

The main purpose of the small grants in Phase IV was to develop research capacity and address information gaps in routine health at the country, regional, and global levels. To maximize cost savings and coordination, the small-grants program was centrally administered and managed, based on the management and lessons learned from the MEASURE Evaluation PRH small-grants program. The small grants focused on FP/RH research topics related to routine health data that had been identified as country-led priorities for decision making.

## Program Objectives

The overall research goal of the program was to use findings to improve RHIS and advance FP outcomes. The MEASURE Evaluation PRH-funded small grants had the following specific aims:

1. Address research gaps in routine health information for FP/RH to inform policy and programmatic decision making
2. Build research capacity among local agencies
3. Increase use of research findings by providing an opportunity for the data to be disseminated to and used by local stakeholders for informed decision making

With financial and technical assistance, the small-grants program supported both primary and secondary data collection and analysis. Each small grant, which averaged just over $14,000,[1] was required to develop a working paper and implement data use activities. Each year of MEASURE Evaluation,[2] a new round of small grants was initiated. Five rounds of small grants were completed during the life of the project.

[1] All dollar amounts are in U.S. dollars.
[2] MEASURE Evaluation refers to MEASURE Evaluation Phase IV.

# APPLICATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

## Advertising the Small-Grants Opportunity

Each round of small grants began with a request for applications (RFA) (Appendix A), which was first approved by USAID. The announcement was disseminated through various channels. It was posted on the MEASURE Evaluation website and went out on such electronic mailing lists as MEASURE Evaluation's Monitor, the CORE Group community of practice, the Global Evaluation and Monitoring Network for Health, Advance Family Planning, the Global Development Network, and the Interagency Gender Working Group.

In Rounds Two through Five, the RFA was also emailed directly to organizations in one of three categories: organizations the project had worked with under the MEASURE Evaluation PRH award, organizations the project was currently working with, and organizations the project had shortlisted but not funded in a previous round of small grants. For each round, the RFA was sent to current or previously funded small-grants recipients to share with their professional networks.

A contact email address was provided in the RFAs for all inquiries. Anywhere from three to 29 inquiries came in during each of the five rounds. Each email message was answered directly within one business day. Prior to the close of the application period, all questions and responses were compiled and posted on the MEASURE Evaluation website for the purpose of transparency.

## Concept Paper Review

Interested applicants were asked to submit a short concept paper (three to four pages) in English that clearly summarized the background/context, rationale for the study, research question(s), scope of analysis, description of dataset, and proposed data use and dissemination activities. This was to be accompanied by a brief cover letter, illustrative budget in U.S. dollars, and curriculum vitae of key personnel.

All applications had to meet the following minimum eligibility criteria stated in the RFA:

- The candidates and organizations had to be from a USAID PRH priority country listed in the RFA (Appendix A).
- People representing themselves rather than an institution or organization were not eligible.
- Applicants representing a field office for an international nongovernmental organization (NGO) were not eligible.
- Concept papers had to be represented by a team of at least three people and must have been submitted on behalf of an NGO, university, research center, etc.
- The team must have had some previous research experience—preferably in FP, specifically, or RH, in general.
- Candidates must have been seeking to build their research and/or data capacity.

After removing the concept papers that did not meet these basic requirements, the remaining applications were reviewed by a small-grants selection committee, led by the small-grants activity lead and composed of MEASURE Evaluation staff members, including the project's FP portfolio manager. The applications were assessed based on the following criteria listed in the RFA:

1. The concept paper demonstrated a conceptual understanding of the problem the proposed research intended to address.
2. Literature was cited providing evidence that this was a research gap in FP and RHIS.

3. The research findings would be relevant for decision making at the country, regional, or international level and/or addressed an issue of significance related to routine health information.
4. The applicant had prior experience working with proposed (or similar) data.
5. The research question(s) was/were focused.
6. There was a good fit between the study objectives, research question(s), and proposed research study design/data to be employed in the study.
7. The proposed research methods and study design were appropriate and rigorous.
8. Based on the research topic and methods, the budget and timeline were realistic.
9. The data use activities were outlined and appeared feasible, appropriate, and had been factored into the budget.
10. The degree to which the small grant would build on the current capacity of the organization to conduct research and encourage data use.
11. Overall, the proposal read well, was easy to follow, and was technically sound.

Applicants received a score of one (low), two (medium), or three (high) for each of the criteria, for a maximum score of 33. The reviewers consulted on the scores and chose the best concept papers to shortlist. The shortlisted applicants were notified and asked to submit full proposals, and the others were notified they had not been shortlisted. If particular issues needed to be clarified or addressed, the activity lead told the shortlisted applicants specifically what revisions the review team would be looking for in each applicant's proposal.

## Proposal Review and Selection

The proposals were due three to four weeks after the shortlist notifications were sent out. These proposals were reviewed based on criteria similar to those applied to the concept papers:

1. The background section demonstrated a conceptual understanding of what the issue was, with clear supporting evidence.
2. The proposal explained how the project would address the problem and/or fill an information gap.
3. The research question(s) was/were focused.
4. There was a good fit between the study objectives, research question(s), and proposed research study design/data to be employed in the study.
5. The data collection tools and data sources were clearly identified.
6. The proposed research methods and study design were appropriate, rigorous, and well-thought-out.
7. Based on the research topic and methods, the budget and timeline were realistic.
8. The data use activities were outlined, appeared feasible and appropriate, and had been factored into the budget.
9. The proposal explained how the small grant would build on the current capacity of the organization to conduct research and encourage data use.

10. More than one person had been identified on the research team, and each member's role was clarified.
11. Overall, the proposal read well, was easy to follow, and was technically sound.

Each proposal was reviewed by at least two people. At times, additional MEASURE Evaluation staff were asked to read a proposal if they had specific technical or country experience that was relevant to the proposal.

Using the same scoring mechanism as with the concept papers, the proposals were assessed on a 33-point scale. Those with the highest scores were prioritized for final selection. The reviewers then examined the list of grantees and made adjustments based on additional considerations. These criteria were applied to subgrantees within each round as well as to the portfolio of subgrantees as a whole:

- A variety of PRH priority countries were represented.
- There was a balance of male and female researchers.
- Both universities and organizations were represented.
- There was diversity in research topics.
- Researchers and organizations that had not already been funded (either through the PRH-funded small grants or through other MEASURE Evaluation small-grants activities) received priority.
- The budgets fell within the parameters of the activity.
- The research and dissemination of findings could be completed in one year.

To support the vetting process, the researchers and organizations were investigated online—both through their institutional websites and through social media (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter). This step was taken to help screen potential subgrantees and look for information to support the qualifications of the research team members.

Based on all the scores and considerations, a tentative final selection was made. Both the activity lead and FP portfolio manager carefully reviewed each of the selected proposals. The list was reviewed again and modified as needed. Each of the selected applicants was then asked to revise his or her proposal and/or budget in line with specific feedback provided by MEASURE Evaluation. Once the applicants made revisions, the proposals were sent to USAID/Washington for technical review. Not only was this step necessary from a procedural perspective, but also it allowed more reviewers to highlight areas in the proposals that would need additional support during project implementation.

The USAID technical advisor either approved a proposal, conditionally approved a proposal (contingent on the applicant addressing an issue in the proposal or budget), or rejected a proposal (generally because of methodological or ethical concerns). After receiving USAID approval, all shortlisted applicants were notified of their status and the final selected applicants were provided with the necessary subaward paperwork.

The 19 subgrantees from the five rounds of subgranting represented 11 countries in Africa and Asia and covered diverse research topics (Table 1). Researchers from 22 out of the 24 USAID PRH priority countries applied for small grants; only Senegal and Afghanistan were not represented.

**Table 1. Final subgrantees and research topics**

| Name of Organization or University | Country | Research Topic |
|---|---|---|
| **Round I** | | |
| Afya Research Africa | Kenya | FP Services in Kenya during a Transition: Utilization Trends across Counties |
| Matibabu Foundation | Kenya | Integrating FP Data in Kenya's DHIS 2* |
| Association for Reproductive and Family Health (ARFH) | Nigeria | Use of Routine Health Information to Inform Budgetary Allocation for RH in Cross River State, Nigeria |
| **Round II** | | |
| Equitable Health Access Initiative (EHAI) | Nigeria | The Strongest Motivators for Using Routine Health Information in FP: A Prospective Study in Lagos, Nigeria |
| Rivers State of Nigeria Primary Health Care Management Board | Nigeria | Use of Technology to Manage Health Data in Rivers State, Nigeria: A Qualitative Study on FP and RHIS |
| Health Promotion Tanzania | Tanzania | Enhancing Use of Routine Health Information for FP to Influence Decision Making in Tanzania |
| Department of Population Studies, Makerere University | Uganda | Integrating FP Data in Uganda's Health Management Information System |
| **Round III** | | |
| University of the Punjab, Institute of Social and Cultural Studies | Pakistan | The RHIS in Punjab Province, Pakistan: Exploring the Potential for Integrating Health Information Systems for FP Data |
| Centre of Population, Health and Nutrition Services (CEPHNS) | Ghana | Improving FP Service Delivery in Ghana |
| Access Global Ltd. | Uganda | Uganda's Resources to Finance FP Commodities: Implications for a Total Market Approach |
| Integrated Health Initiative (IHI) | Malawi | Integrating FP Data from Public and Private Health Facilities in Malawi: How Current Approaches Align with FP2020 Goals |
| **Round IV** | | |
| Governance Links Tanzania | Tanzania | Strengthening RHIS through Incorporation of FP Quality Assessment Indicators |
| Zambia Association of Gynaecology and Obstetrics (ZAGO), University Teaching Hospital | Zambia | Adherence to Standards for Adolescent-Friendly Health Services in Public Health Facilities in Lusaka, Zambia |
| Research and Development Division, Ghana Health Service | Ghana | Experiences and Perceptions of Health Staff on Applying Information Technology for District Health Data Management in Ghana |
| Indian Institute of Health Management Research (IIHMR) | India | Engendering Evidence-Based Policy for Young People's RH in India |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (iccdr,b) | Bangladesh | Using DHIS 2 Software to Collect Health Data in Bangladesh |
| **Round V** | | |
| The Rescue Initiative-South Sudan (TRI-SS) | South Sudan | Analyzing, Interpreting, and Communicating Routine FP Data in South Sudan |
| Mzumbe University, School of Public Administration and Management | Tanzania | Creating a Culture of Data Use in Tanzania: Assessing Health Providers' Capacity to Analyze and Use FP Data |
| Africa Field Epidemiologic Network (AFENET) | Nigeria | FP Indicators Assessment and Data Quality Audit in Selected Health Facilities across Nigeria |

* District Health Information Software, version 2

# PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

The small-grants program ran from 2014 through 2019 and was led by the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill through the MEASURE Evaluation project, based in Chapel Hill. The activity lead was the primary point of contact for the subgrant applicants and recipients and provided overall managerial and technical assistance (TA). Palladium, a MEASURE Evaluation partner, administered the subagreements. Palladium was responsible for compiling the contractual paperwork, ensuring compliance with USAID rules and regulations, issuing the subagreements, and disbursing payments to the subgrantees.

## Subgrantee Deliverables

The subagreements were administered to organizations or institutions as fixed-price contracts. Accordingly, the activity lead developed scopes of work for each of the selected subgrantees based on the approved proposals and terms of the subagreements. The scopes of work outlined the timeline and the following subgrantee deliverables:

- **Activity reports:** Subgrantees were required to submit an activity report within 15 days of the completion of the quarter. MEASURE Evaluation provided a template for the quarterly activity report.
- **Payment requests**: Subgrantees were paid in three installments. They were provided with a payment request form and were required to complete the form when they achieved the following three deliverables: at the beginning of the study, upon completion of all contractual paperwork (55% of the total award); upon submission of the draft manuscript (35% of the total award); and after the manuscript had been finalized and the findings disseminated (remaining 10% of the award).
- **Manuscript**: Using the working paper template provided by MEASURE Evaluation, subgrantees submitted a draft manuscript to MEASURE Evaluation for technical review and feedback. It was the subgrantee's responsibility to respond to the reviewers' comments and edits on all drafts and submit a final paper containing the abstract, introduction, background, methods, results, discussion, recommendations, and conclusion.
- **Final report**: A brief final report was submitted with the final payment request explaining how the research project built individual and/or institutional capacity, what the key findings were, and how the findings were disseminated and even possibly used. MEASURE Evaluation provided the template for the end-of-project report.

At the time subgrantees were notified of being selected, they were sent several pieces of paperwork to complete and were also strongly encouraged to submit their applications for local ethics approval, because this had the potential of significantly derailing the study timelines. The subgrantees sent electronic copies of institutional review board (IRB) approval to the activity lead to keep on file.

To help the subgrantees manage their deliverables and timelines, the activity lead sent several reminders when something was due and resent templates, as needed.

## Budget

Prior to selecting the final subgrantees, the budget for the small-grants activity was reviewed to determine how many small grants could be funded each round. This ranged from three to five research projects per

round. Based on the number of applications received, the acceptance rate ranged from 20 percent in Round I, to only 1.7 percent in Round V (Table 2).

The subawards ranged from $9,999 to $24,000. The direct payments to the subgrantees accounted for 43.3 percent of the total budget. The remaining costs of the program involved administration of the grants, technical assistance to the research teams throughout the subgranting period, indirect costs, and overhead. We were able to allocate almost half of the budget to directly fund the subgrantees, because the small-grants program was administered and managed completely virtually and, therefore, did not require travel expenses.

Although most of the time budgeted for the small-grants activity was for the activity lead, many others worked on the activity, such as those on the small-grants selection committee, editors, the graphic designer, and finance and administration staff of MEASURE Evaluation and Palladium.

**Table 2. Statistics from the five rounds of small grants**

| | Round I | Round II | Round III | Round IV | Round V |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Number of applications received** | 15 | 32 | 26 | 109 | 176 |
| **Number of countries represented** | 7 | 7 | 12 | 16 | 18 |
| **Number of applications shortlisted** | 7 | 7 | 7 | 19 | 22 |
| **Number of proposals funded** | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 3 |
| **Average award amount (direct costs only)** | $16,100 | $10,200 | $13,024 | $18,643 | $12,617 |

## Monitoring the Research Projects

The activity lead employed several strategies to closely monitor the research projects and support the subgrantees' successful completion of their research projects.

First, the newly awarded subgrantees were asked to provide contact information (email addresses, Skype addresses, and mobile phone numbers) for each member of the research team. Although email was the primary form of communication, it was beneficial having other means of contacting the subgrantees to have a conversation when an issue arose.

Secondly, the subgrantees were provided with a simple, one-page activity reporting template to be submitted at the completion of every quarter. This helped with monitoring the progress of the research projects. It also served as an opportunity for the activity lead to check in with the subgrantees, ask specific questions about their study and timeline, and provide validation to the subgrantees that we were interested in their progress since every activity report was acknowledged and followed up.

Lastly, a close working relationship with each of the principal investigators (PIs) was prioritized from the start, which helped ensure the research projects stayed on track and on time. It was important for the researchers to know they were supported, could seek TA from MEASURE Evaluation when needed, and could openly communicate any barriers they were facing. This was achieved through regular correspondence, timely feedback, follow-up communication, reaching out to subgrantees when the opportunity to meet face-to-face presented itself (e.g., at a conference or when in-country for a different project), and setting the tone for collaboration and teamwork.

# STRENGTHENING RESEARCH CAPACITY

One of the primary goals of the small-grants program was to build local research capacity. The program was successful in providing the funding and TA to organizations and researchers, many of whom were young, emerging, and from underfunded organizations, to conduct rigorous research, develop a data dissemination plan, and share their research findings with the broader FP community.

The model of capacity building that was employed focused on tailored, consistent TA throughout the research projects. The various ways the program strengthened capacity are explained below.

## Providing Staff with Hands-On Research Experience

This funding opportunity allowed research knowledge and skills to be put into practice. In LMICs, the need for and motivation to conduct research studies is abundant, but the money is scarce. Providing a relatively modest amount of funding and TA made local implementation of research studies possible. PIs from Kenya and Ghana gave the following explanations:

> *This funding opportunity has helped advance the research skills, knowledge and experiences of all the research project staff by putting theories learned through reading and learning into practice during the proposal writing, budgeting, and development of tools, pre-test / data collection and writing the final report.* (Matibabu Foundation, Round I)

> *This was the first major research work carried out by CEPHANS. It built the capacity of the research team in research organization and the conduct using mixed methods, including the ethical review requirements and the procedures.* (CEPHANS, Round III)

The small grants enabled the research team members to get involved in every stage of research including applying for a grant, developing a full research proposal, seeking ethical review, gathering stakeholder buy-in, developing data collection tools, conducting data collection, performing data analysis, writing a research manuscript, and presenting and reporting research findings. Several subgrantees explained how their research skills improved:

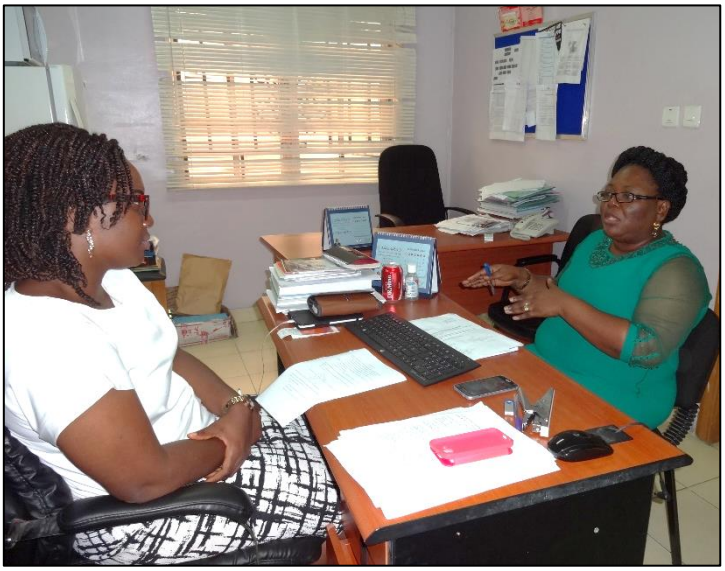

Photo: Member of the Rivers State Primary Health Care Management Board research team conducting an in-depth interview. Courtesy of Rivers State Primary Health Care Management Board.

> *The funding opportunity provided by the MEASURE Evaluation Small-Grants Program afforded the involvement of regional and some district coordinators of health research in the central region of Ghana in all stages of the research and development process; namely, proposal development, implementation of the proposal, report writing, and dissemination of results. It facilitated strengthening the capacity of the health research coordinators, especially in three key areas: research leadership, research management, and project management.* (Ghana Health Services, Round IV)

> *The grant by MEASURE Evaluation developed "hard" research capacity in evidence-based policy research, methodology, survey research, and data analysis. The grant developed "soft" research capacity in terms of leadership, communication, teamwork, and knowledge sharing. The institutions enhanced their knowledge of*

*international standards in health services research, research ethics, and research management. In the future we might offer new academic programmes or conduct trainings on health services research.* (IIHMR, Round IV)

*The skills acquired includes; writing skills, data management skills, data analysis skills, and field work management skills. In addition, the team has learned how to deal with health care providers who have multiple tasks, such as managerial and clinical, that require appointment and dealing with difficult people.* (Mzumbe, Round V)

Through direct technical assistance, many of the subgrantees commented specifically on how much their writing skills improved. Most of them had never received detailed feedback on their writing, nor had they ever received support from professional editors who copyedited their work to international standards. The PI from TRI-SS shared, "The extensive review of the working paper improved our skills of analyzing research data and report writing" (Round V). Other subgrantees added the following perspectives:

*Lots of research knowledge and skills were learnt form the inputs, interactions, and feedbacks during the development of the final proposal and questionnaires/study tools from the MEASURE Evaluation team.* (EHAI, Round II)

*For most of our team members, it was the first practical exposure to qualitative research and more importantly, qualitative data analysis. . . . Our report writing and qualitative data reporting skills were greatly improved by the comments and feedback from MEASURE Evaluation.* (Rivers State of Nigeria Primary Health Care Management Board, Round II)

## Creating the Opportunity to Work with New Data Sets and Data Software

The small grants provided the opportunity for researchers to explore new or unfamiliar data sets and data software. From this experience, Afya Research Africa learned how to best extract and consume DHIS2 data. Health Promotion Tanzania said the opportunity gave them an understanding of how the health management information system operates. The PIs from AFENET and CEPHANS shared the following:

*Previously, my organization had conducted data quality audits for malaria, HIV, and routine immunization programs. This funding opportunity was the first time we were working on a data quality audit in reproductive health and family planning.* (AFENET, Round V)

Photo: CEPHANS-led training of data collectors. Courtesy of CEPHANS.

*The 20 staff from Ghana Health Services in the region, with at least one coming from each of the 13 districts, also acquired some skills in interviewing techniques, use of the GPS* [Global Positioning System] *machine, use of Microsoft Excel and SPSS version 21 for data analysis, and QGIS version 2.18 for mapping.* (CEPHANS, Round III)

## Mentoring for Future Research

Being selected as a MEASURE Evaluation small-grants recipient prepared the research teams for future research in several ways. First, the grants gave researchers experience and credentials to lead future studies. The PI from IHI said that the small grant was her first assignment to lead and that the opportunity built her effectiveness as a leader.

Second, by including junior staff on the research teams, the small grants supported country-led efforts to develop research capacity. This was especially feasible at universities, as expressed by two PIs:

> *Having experience in this research project, my two interns got a "research associate" position in the department. In a nutshell, this project was really a blessing for me and my team.* (University of the Punjab, Round III)

> *Junior academic staff of Mzumbe University were recruited and involved in the research project. Through this they have learned how to collect data, gained field experiences, data management, transcription of data, using Atlas.ti software, and how to use output from the programme to write a report.* (Mzumbe University, Round V)

Third, the small grants allowed the researcher and organizations to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their research skills to prepare them for future research. A PI from Nigeria made the following comment:

> *The MEASURE Evaluation small research grant was the first grant applied for and awarded to the research unit, Rivers State Primary Health Care Management Board. From the start, it helped increase our awareness to external research funding and the need to start developing grant writing skills.* (Rivers State of Nigeria Primary Health Care Management Board, Round II)

## Building Confidence to Conduct Research

Not only were the small grants competitive, but also the subgrantees were held to high research standards and were held accountable to the funding conditions of the subgrant. Once the research projects were successfully completed, several of the PIs reflected on how their experience successfully leading a research project and meeting the small-grants reporting requirements built their individual confidence, and that of their organization, to undertake research studies.

Photo: University of the Punjab research team with Mudasir Mustafa, PI, leading the meeting. Courtesy of University of the Punjab, Institute of Social and Cultural Studies.

> *The improved individual capacity also positively contributed to overall organizational development by building the confidence of the organization to be able to take on other research-oriented projects such as client satisfaction needs, market survey, and conducting its own baseline assessments when implementing other projects.* (Matibabu Foundation, Round I)

> *This is my first research project as principal investigator, and this opportunity has changed my research career. I may not do justice in expressing my learning and confidence I got from this project. . . . this opportunity paved a way for early career professionals to step in research network with confidence. And yes, now I bid research proposals with confidence and won two research projects in a row.* (University of the Punjab, Round III)

> *With this study, I started from scratch on my own rather than just reviewing a work and joining. This was a great challenge and a learning experience. I learned* [the] *importance of a proper work plan giving myself enough time to avoid disappointments, especially with research ethics and other research regulatory bodies. I now have more confidence to write up a study and manage it. I know what I need to be aware of in the processes.* (ZAGO, Round IV)

## Supporting Plans to Engage Stakeholders and Disseminate Research Findings

A key aspect of the research projects was engaging stakeholders before, during, and after the research was conducted. Subgrantee applicants were required to submit a well-thought-out dissemination plan and funded subgrantees needed to report on how their research findings were disseminated. Many subgrantees shared the positive outcomes of creating and implementing a stakeholder engagement plan:

> *With the support of* [the] *MEASURE Evaluation team, we were able to utilize the funding opportunity to stimulate stakeholders in Cross River State to critically appraise the processes of data management, review, collection, storage, and coordination. It provided opportunity to foster interaction among different departments, units, and disease programmes, especially related to reproductive health services within the state ministry of health.* (ARFH, Round I)

> *The project led to* [the] *establishment of effective interfaces between HMIS* [health management information system] *research producers and users. For example, through the multi-stakeholder dialogue workshop conducted, we were able to network, collaborate, communicate, and share experiences with stakeholders from various MOH* [Ministry of Health] *departments and organizations such as PACE* [Programme for Accessible health Communication and Education] *and Marie Stopes Uganda. This created collaborations between the Department of Population Studies at Makerere University, the Office of the Prime Minister, and the MOH and other organizations.* (Makerere, Round II)

The small-grants activity lead assisted with helping the subgrantees think through how their findings could be shared beyond the traditional dissemination of a report. This built the capacity of organizations to translate facts and findings into action-oriented recommendations and advocacy information.

> *Implementing the DDIU* [data demand and information use] *project has strengthened the skills of the project staff and ARFH team members in advocating and supporting the use of research findings as evidence to inform programs and policies in Nigeria.* (ARFH, Round I)

Photo: Shaan Mubera Khan and Tahmina Begum at icddr,b's dissemination seminar in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Courtesy of iccdr,b.

Executing the dissemination plan and engaging stakeholders developed other skills such as presenting, responding to journal reviewers' comments, and networking. Table 3 illustrates the subgrantees' dissemination activities.

**Table 3. Small-grants dissemination activities**

| |
|---|
| Presentations to national, regional, district, and/or county government representatives |
| Stakeholders meeting with health facility staff, FP implementing partners, and FP/RH government coordinators and officers |
| One-day dissemination workshop with government ministries, departments, and agencies; civil society organizations; and donors |
| Policy brief |
| Presentation at professional association meetings |
| Presentation at FP implementers routine monitoring and evaluation meeting |
| Multi-stakeholder workshop with public and private stakeholders |
| Journal publication |
| Regional review conference |
| Seminars at universities with public health experts, students, staff, and faculty |
| Electronic dissemination of the report with key findings and recommendations highlighted and sent to ministry of health staff, district health offices, and FP implementing partners |
| Quarterly FP technical working group meeting |
| Adolescent Health Working Group Symposium |
| International conferences (i.e., the East Central and Southern Africa College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology [ECSACOG] conference and the Health Monitoring and Evaluation Best Practices conference, both in Tanzania) |
| Annual district-level performance review meeting |
| Presentation at RH forum |

## Advancing Subgrantees' Goals to Establish a Presence in the Research Sphere

The impact of the small-grants experience extended beyond the study findings. The research projects built not only the subgrantees' research capacity but also their research portfolios and reputation as a competent research organization. Several subgrantees described this effect:

> *TRI-SS has gained a reputation as an organization with a strong research capacity. We received two grants after this research work, which include Menstrual hygiene Management funded by Amplify Change and Ebola Viral Disease Risk Communication Formative Research funded by UNICEF.* (TRI-SS, Round V)

> *IHI has seen an increase in interest within IHI to undertake high-quality research and to engage with the wider community of stakeholders, evident are the numerous proposals submitted to bigger organizations to conduct national studies.* (IHI, Round III)

Photo: Access Global research team, from left to right, Rose Nakandh, Milcah Ssentamu, Rachel Namuge, Ventrine Marion Chelimo, and Dr. Albert Kalangwa, PI. Courtesy of Access Global Ltd.

*It was an opportunity for the organization to establish its presence as a research organization with Lagos State Government, which was a major partner in the implementation.* (EHAI, Round II)

Photo: Dr. Abayomi Afe, PI for EHAI, disseminating the research findings to FP stakeholders in Lagos, Nigeria. Courtesy of EHAI.

IIHMR was awarded the subgrant shortly after they had gained university status. They revealed that the subgrant improved their standing for scholarly research and teaching. Furthermore, they explained that the subgrant enabled them and their collaborator, Central University of Rajasthan, "to synergize their geographic proximity through networking and knowledge-sharing, and nurture a collaborative research culture" (IIHMR, Round IV).

## Linking Subgrantees to Other Opportunities

The activity lead periodically kept in touch with current and former subgrantees about professional development opportunities. These included notifications about international conferences that pertained to their research topics and new online health courses available free from sites like the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine Open Study Courses, the Global Health eLearning Center, and Future Learn. Subgrantees were also notified of funding opportunities, for example, a research open call (with particular interest from researchers in LMICs) to develop a standardized sexual health survey instrument; a call for expression of interest to participate in an initiative aimed at increasing domestic financing for immunization and health; and a request for information to identify innovators able to scale up comprehensive primary healthcare in LMICs.

All subgrantees were added to the MEASURE Evaluation electronic mailing list and received regular communication from the project about new awards, publications, courses, and resources.

# LESSONS LEARNED

Administering and managing the small-grants program and strengthening the subgrantees' research capacity yielded the following lessons:

- **Be explicit in the RFA about the eligibility criteria and objectives of the small-grants program.** Several concept papers were automatically rejected for various reasons (e.g., the paper was not from a USAID priority country; the budget was exceptionally high; or the proposed research exceeded the timeline for the small grants). Before each successive round of the program, the RFA was reviewed, and if necessary, the eligibility criteria were further clarified to more specifically target the groups intended for the program.
- **Conduct due diligence about organizations to get a sense of an organization's credibility and reputation.** Prior to making our final subgrantee selections, we attempted to gather as much information as we could, both online and from colleagues, about the organizations during the shortlist period. We also took into consideration other factors that would give us a sense of how the researchers operated, such as how responsive they were to emails about their proposal and how thoroughly they addressed our questions and comments.
- **As appropriate, assist the applicants/subgrantees by providing templates for requested items.** Templates were provided to the applicants for the proposals and to the subgrantees for the quarterly reports, requests for payment, working paper manuscripts, and end-of-project reports. This made it easier to review documents, clearly convey what information was needed, and process the paperwork with minimal back-and-forth.

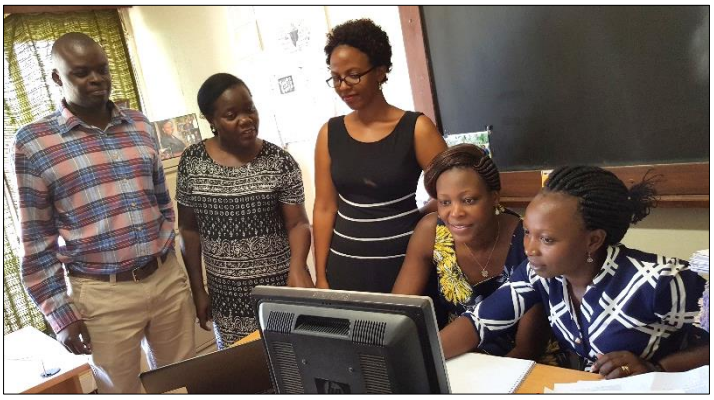

Photo: Makerere University research team, from left to right, Dr. Stephen Wandera (PI), Dr. Betty Kwagala, Dr. Allen Kabagenyi, Patricia Ndugga, and Olivia Nankinga. Courtesy of the Department of Population Studies, Makerere University.

- **Encourage the selected subgrantees to seek IRB approval/waiver as soon as possible**. One of the lessons learned from managing the MEASURE Evaluation PRH small grants was to remind the subgrantees to start the process of applying to their local IRB early. Although receiving final IRB approval still delayed some of the research projects, notifying the applicants as soon as they were selected and encouraging them to immediately address the IRB approval/waiver requirement helped to mitigate delays.
- **Take into account the time it takes for administrators to process the contracts.** In some instances, it took nearly two months to process the subagreements and first payment, owing to many anticipated and unanticipated administrative procedures and delays. It is critical to factor in this lengthy process when developing timelines. To minimize delays, it was also important to work closely with staff who had knowledge of and experience with administering subagreements and who were familiar with the subgranting procedures and paperwork.
- **Use various means of communication to stay in close contact with the subgrantees and establish an effective working relationship.** Regular communication with the subgrantees was

essential for adhering to timelines and ensuring all terms of the agreement were met. In addition to email, we found phone calls, Skype conversations, and in-person meetings (when feasible) to be effective in maintaining close contact with the research team and helping the projects stay on task and on time.

- **Invest and budget for the time to provide as much technical support as needed.** Providing extensive feedback to some of the less-experienced researchers over the entire span of their project paid off in higher-quality proposals, manuscripts, and dissemination materials. Furthermore, extending the activity lead's level of effort on the small grants beyond the contractual end date of the awards allowed for additional TA to be provided when requested by former subgrantees, such assistance as reviewing a PowerPoint presentation for a dissemination meeting, providing input on a manuscript to be submitted for journal publication, or even reviewing a research proposal for a new funding opportunity.
- **Prior to each new round of small grants, evaluate the program and make the necessary adjustments.** We used the time before beginning a new round of small grants to review the RFA, revise timelines, adjust the budget, and modify the management of the program, as needed, based on the lessons learned from the previous round(s).
- **If possible, set aside a small amount of funding to provide financial assistance to those given the opportunity to present their research findings at an international conference.** In a couple of instances, subgrantees reached out to MEASURE Evaluation for financial support to attend an international conference where their abstract had been accepted. The project was unable to provide even limited financial assistance to the subgrantees because the activity budget was very tight. Subsequently, because of lack of funding, these researchers missed out on an exciting opportunity to disseminate their research findings to an international audience.

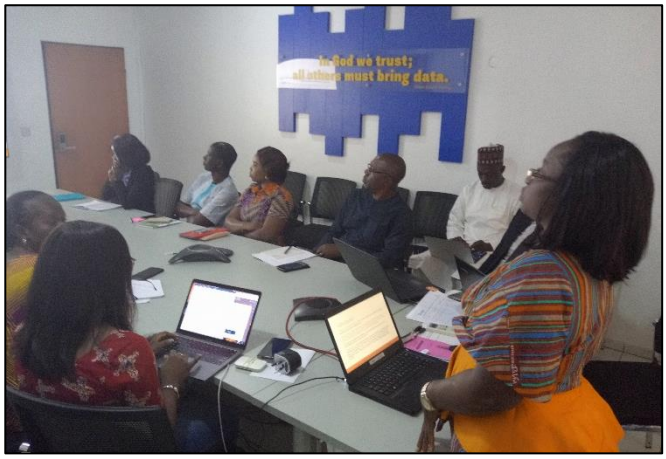

Photo: Dr. Olukemi Titilope Olugbade, PI for AFENET, sharing the results of the study findings at a dissemination meeting. Courtesy of AFENET.

- **Be realistic that there is no "silver bullet" or shortcut for strengthening research capacity.** Improving researchers' capacity to conduct rigorous research requires continuous, in-depth, and intentional effort. It requires building a relationship with the researcher, so that the TA is collaborative and is seen as a joint endeavor. Although this is time-intensive, very hands on, and sometimes tedious, it makes a noticeable difference in the final deliverables and can make a sustainable impact on the researchers by helping to springboard their careers.

# CONCLUSION

MEASURE Evaluation's PRH-funded small-grants program was an effective strategy for increasing the evidence base in FP and RHIS, improving research capacity in LMICs, and providing data use opportunities.

With all 19 of the subgrantees achieving the terms of their agreement, the program was deemed an overall success by both MEASURE Evaluation and the subgrantees, as expressed in follow-up communication with the activity lead. It provided a means of putting research theories into practice, interacting with local FP and RHIS stakeholders, and strengthening the research expertise and reputation of local organizations and universities.

Our recommendation is to promote small grants as a viable approach to filling research gaps and providing hands-on research experience for those working in areas where promotion of evidence-based practices is a priority.

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# APPENDIX A. REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS (ROUND V)

## Small Grants to Support Research in Family Planning: Request for Applications

The MEASURE Evaluation project is pleased to announce a request for applications for its small grants program to increase the evidence base in routine health information systems (RHIS) in family planning and reproductive health (FP/RH). The three primary objectives of this program are:

1. To **build research capacity** among local agencies;
2. To **address research gaps** in routine health information for FP/RH to inform policy and programmatic decision making; and
3. To **increase use of research findings** by providing an opportunity for the data to be disseminated to and used by local stakeholders.

The small grants are intended to support primary and secondary data analysis – especially national and subnational program or policy evaluation. The overall goal is to use the research findings to improve RHIS and advance FP outcomes. Small grant recipients are expected to produce a publishable manuscript and complete a data use activity.

**Eligibility**

Eligible candidates include country or regional academic institutions or centers, nonprofit and for-profit research organizations, parastatals, and research-focused NGOs or firms. Individuals representing themselves and not an institution/ organization, as well as those representing a regional/field office for an international NGO are ineligible for this funding opportunity. All candidates must be from a USAID FP/RH priority country (listed at the end of the RFA). Candidates must be seeking to build their research and/or data use capacity.

Eligible applications will use appropriate and rigorous methods to respond to a question of interest to stakeholders in the country or region being studied. Potential topic areas are listed at the end of the RFA. Applications should also include data use activities and/or products that help ensure the use of research findings by appropriate stakeholders, which may include: the development of a short briefing paper with recommendations and a presentation of the key actionable findings from the analysis; holding a workshop for policymakers and/or program decision makers to discuss key findings and the implication of these findings for policies and programs; organizing a meeting with national or regional level staff from the ministry of health to discuss the research findings and develop an action plan based on the findings; and so forth.

Eligible proposals should be comprised of a team of three people (minimum), submitted on behalf of an NGO, university, etc. The team should have previous research experience, preferably in FP specifically, or RH in general, but need not be highly proficient in research techniques as technical and administrative assistance will be available to subgrantees at all stages of the small grants program to build organizational research capacity.

**Small Grants Awards**

The base amount for a small grant is US$10,000, which is intended to cover basic research expenses for a **twelve-month** timeline. The total amount of the approved subgrant may be higher as it will be based on proposed budgets reflecting realistic data collection and analysis

activities. Anticipated data use and dissemination activities should be included in the proposed budget. Travel to an international conference to present the research findings may not be requested.

Funds will be paid in three installments: at the onset of the proposed study, after receipt of the first draft of a working paper, and after completion of the final working paper and other products related to data dissemination and use.

MEASURE Evaluation will assign a technical staff member to provide assistance for data analysis, editing drafts, and/or data utilization, as needed. This individual will also administratively manage the subagreements.

## Application Procedure

To apply, please submit the following in English:

- brief cover letter;
- concept paper (3-4 pages) clearly summarizing the background/context, rationale for the study, research question(s), scope of analysis, description of dataset, and proposed data use and dissemination activities;
- illustrative budget in U.S. dollars; and
- curriculum vitae of key personnel.

Concept papers are due by **January 5, 2018**. Applications received after this date will not be accepted. All candidates will be notified by January 25, 2018. Short-listed candidates will then be requested to submit a detailed research proposal (5-10 pages) with the following sections:

- background/context;
- research question(s);
- methods (study design and data collection);
- data analysis;
- plan for how the research findings will be disseminated and potentially used;
- composition of research team;
- description of how the subgrant will build research capacity; and
- detailed budget.

Once selected, subgrantees will be required to submit proof of institutional or country ethics review and approval or exemption.

## Selection

Applications will be assessed on:

1. The degree to which the application demonstrates a conceptual understanding of the problem the proposed research intends to address.
2. Evidence this is a research gap in FP and RHIS.
3. A good fit between the research question(s) and proposed data to be used in the study.
4. The degree to which the proposed research methods are appropriate and rigorous.
5. Evidence that the research findings are relevant for decision making at the country, regional, or international level and/or address an issue of significance related to routine health information.
6. Applicant's prior experience working with proposed (or similar) data.
7. The feasibility and appropriateness of data use activities to the proposed research question(s).

8. The degree to which the small grant will build on the current capacity of the organization to conduct research and encourage data use.
9. Realistic budget and timeline based on the proposed research topic and available MEASURE Evaluation funds.
10. The overall quality of the concept paper (i.e., it reads well, is easy to follow, and is technically sound).

**Suggested Research Topics**

All research topics must address a research gap in routine health information for FP/RH. The following list contains examples of research topics in FP and RHIS:

- Exploring how effectively FP data in the RHIS is analyzed, interpreted, and communicated so the information is understood and useful;
- Assessing the influence of performance-based incentives on quality of FP services and/or data;
- Incorporating indicators for assessing quality of FP services and care in RHIS;
- Examining the barriers and enablers to implementing FP guidelines and standards of practice;
- Exploring how to create interoperable systems to link FP service delivery statistics (e.g., number of postpartum FP visits; number of vasectomies performed), population-based statistics (e.g., number of births; percent of women of reproductive age who are internally displaced), and resources for health (e.g., skills mix of human resources for health; geographical distribution of health workers);
- Evaluating electronic tracking systems on commodity supply chain logistics in FP, specifically contraceptives;
- Investigating how to strengthen the role of service providers and pharmacy managers in logistics management information systems (LMIS), stock management, and commodity forecasting; and
- Examining how to improve data quality to make information systems more reliable and useful.

**USAID FP Priority Countries**

The research must focus on one of the following USAID FP/RH priority countries:

Caribbean: Haiti

Middle East: Yemen

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Asia: Nepal | Philippines | Pakistan | India | Bangladesh | Afghanistan |
| Africa: | | | | | |
| South Sudan | Ghana | Tanzania | Ethiopia | Kenya | |
| Madagascar | Malawi | Liberia | Zambia | Rwanda | |
| Mozambique | Nigeria | Senegal | Uganda | Democratic Republic of the Congo | |

**Contact Information**

Please send inquiries and complete applications to **measure_rfp@unc.edu**. All questions must be received before January 2, 2018. Responses to the questions will be posted on the MEASURE Evaluation website the following day, January 3.

# APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW WITH SUBGRANTEE, MUDASIR SAEED: BUILDING EXPERIENCE AND CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES IN PAKISTAN

Originally published by MEASURE Evaluation (2018, November 7). MEASURE Evaluation Sub-grantee, Mudasir Saeed: Building Experience and Challenging Stereotypes in Pakistan. [Web log post]. Retrieved from: https://medium.com/@measureevaluation/measure-evaluation-sub-grantee-mudasir-saeed-building-experience-and-challenging-stereotypes-in-62c9260c7e9e

Photo: Mudasir Saeed, principle investigator for the small-grant project implemented by the Institute of Social and Cultural Studies at the University of Punjab

MEASURE Evaluation, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), has, since 2009, supported family planning research through a small grants program. Researchers at local organizations receive funding and technical assistance to conduct a one-year research project on family planning and routine health information systems. One of the awards was led by Mudasir Saeed,[3] of the Institute of Social and Cultural Studies at the University of the Punjab in Pakistan. Here are excerpts from an interview between Ms. Saeed and Bridgit Adamou, MEASURE Evaluation, who is manager of the small grants program.

**Bridgit: Explain how it came together from seeing the RFA to submitting an application.**

**Mudasir:** When I saw the RFA, I was enthusiastic to work on a research project. Though I understood the idea and sketched a tentative structure for writing the proposal, I wasn't confident that I would win it. I discussed the idea with a senior colleague who helped me refine [the response]. I also discussed it with my colleagues, who agreed to be coauthors. I worked on the proposal for about two weeks, mostly writing it at night, outside of my official work hours. My professor, Ehsanullah Tarin, reviewed my first draft and gave his critical oversight.

**Bridgit: What was your reaction when you heard your proposal was accepted? Had you applied for a research grant before and, if so, what was the outcome?**

**Mudasir:** I drowned with excitement and happiness as I was not expecting it! Despite working as a core team member on other proposals and with different research projects, I had never applied for a research grant as the principal investigator (PI). I thought that most grants were awarded based on the author's outstanding research profile, like a person [who] has a PhD, several years of experience, numerous publications, and is older. In the past, no one had encouraged me like Professor Tarin did, so I give him credit as he trusted me and motivated me to pursue this. The director of my institute, Dr. Zakria Zakar, also encouraged me and supported me along the way.

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[3] Since this interview, Mudasir got married and changed her name to Mudasir Mustafa.

**Bridgit: Describe some of the challenges faced when you were conducting your research.**

Photo: Mudasir Saeed

**Mudasir**: It was first time I led a project on my own and there was no senior who could guide me except the team at MEASURE Evaluation. I really sweated it! For example, when I contacted people for interviews, my requests were turned down. Finally, I got access to a few middle or senior government officials who helped me get access to key informants.

An unexpected challenge had to do with my voice. Apparently, over the phone I sound older than I am. So, when I went to conduct interviews, the people often seemed surprised, commenting, "Oh! I thought you might be a senior lecturer or older woman." I think this made them skeptical of my knowledge and expertise. Likewise, most of the participants who attended the dissemination meeting were expecting the presentation would be given by a middle-aged woman. When they saw me they smiled hesitantly, but as I started presenting, things got better, and I was respected by all.

Data analysis and report writing were challenging. Initially, I was confused where to start and how to present findings. But with your help, Bridgit, it was easier and more manageable. Whenever, I got stuck at some point, I simply went to the MEASURE Evaluation website and started looking up different topics. Then, a bevy of ideas came into my head and helped me to complete my analysis and writing task.

**Bridgit: What is it like conducting family planning research in Pakistan?**

**Mudasir:** Family planning is still a taboo issue; people hesitate to talk about it. Interestingly, when I contacted different stakeholders to invite them to our dissemination meeting, most were surprised that we were conducting this research! When I called the director of Rahnuma [the International Planned Parenthood Federation affiliate in Pakistan], he was surprised to know that someone from Punjab University dared to talk about family planning and thus, he replied that he would surely come. Likewise, when we talked with the deputy director of the Population Welfare Department, she replied yes and cancelled two important meetings just to attend this one. She encouraged the university staff to work on this significant topic.

**Bridgit: What do you consider to be your successes or personal accomplishments during this research project? One thing for sure is your success with winning two subsequent research projects!**

**Mudasir:** Other than the subsequent research success, the main accomplishment for me was finishing the project on time. I'm also proud of the dissemination meeting, as this event made me realize that I conducted a worthy study and in the right way. Though improvements are always welcomed, I'm satisfied with the report and its findings. Thirdly, being the sole author of the report was the toughest job, as previously I was always a coauthor. However, I am happy about what I accomplished with guidance from the MEASURE Evaluation team.

Photo: Mudasir Saeed

**Bridgit: One of the key objectives of our small grants program is to build research capacity. How do you feel this experience built your capacity and that of your team members?**

**Mudasir:** I learned how important stakeholder mapping is and what the prerequisites are for writing a sound research paper. In addition, I understood the real meaning of "iterative sampling"—because during report writing, we had to contact some of our study participants again to clarify various aspects.

I asked this question of an assistant on my team, Uroosa Yousaf. She said, "An amazing thing was the dissemination meeting. It made me realize that doing a research project [is] worth nothing until and unless you disseminate the findings to the stakeholders, especially to the policymakers. That's the only way; serve the purpose of [the] research."

With experience from this opportunity, my two interns got a research associate position in the department.

**Bridgit: With the research project completed, what would you like to happen next?**

**Mudasir:** I have been planning on writing two articles from this research, one to be published in an international peer-reviewed journal and the second for a conference. This project paved the way for me to be in a research network and now I am submitting a research proposal as either the PI or co-PI. I appreciate USAID and MEASURE Evaluation's efforts to provide the learning opportunity and platform for young researchers. It really helps researchers get recognition in networks, academia, and publications.

Read Mudasir's working paper, "The Routine Health Information System in Punjab Province, Pakistan—Exploring the Potential for Integrating Health Information Systems for Family Planning Data" here.

For more about MEASURE Evaluation, visit our website at www.measureevaluation.org

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