

Potential for Family Planning Program Sustainability in sub-Saharan Africa: Evidence from 33 Countries

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Extended abstract

Background

Sustainability, with countries taking responsibility for ensuring access to services and contraceptive commodities, has long been an aim for family planning programs, with increasing calls for government ownership, and localization along with domestic resource mobilization. A much broader issue, program sustainability covers other resources whether financial or in kind, and utilization -- government policies, whether and how funds are used, how the program is managed. Sustainability refers to the ability of a program to continue producing positive outcomes and impacts over time (Schell et al (2013)). The abrupt cancellation of USAID funding in 2025 and shifts in other donor funding add critical importance to the topic of program sustainability.

There is no single definition of sustainability in FP, given varying focus on what is to be sustained (a practice, an intervention, an organization, or a broader program). One useful definition of FP program sustainability comes from a USAID-funded population project in Egypt: “The national family planning program and its public, private and NGO institutions can provide current and potential clients with the information and services necessary to obtain the benefits of quality family planning on a continuous basis without external aid” (Khalifa et al., 2001).

Experience with programs around the world has generated lists of key components of FP programs to consider for sustainability (Khalifa et al., 2001; Cromer et al., 2004; Santiso-Galvez and Bertrand, 2007; HIPs, 2018; Speizer et al., 2019). The HIP Partnership notes that “in order for voluntary family planning programs to be successful and sustainable, there needs to be strong national capacity to implement and manage programs, including capacity to mobilize and spend the necessary financial resources for family planning commodities, service delivery, demand creation, and training” (HIPs, 2018).

These elements can be subsumed under three components of program sustainability: enabling environment (including financial sustainability), institutional sustainability; and demand sustainability (Khalifa et al., 2001).

Purpose

Assessing FP programming with a sustainability lens can provide valuable insight into the potential of programs in SSA to become, and remain, sustainable, and challenges facing countries navigating the donor landscape that abruptly shifted in 2025. This paper uses a unique dataset from a cross-national survey in 2023 to take the pulse of stakeholders steeped in their countries’ FP program about the state of sustainability of the program, actions that are being taken, and the key challenges their countries face. The paper focuses on two sub-regions of sub-Saharan Africa, namely 17 countries in East and Southern Africa, and 16 countries in West and Central Africa that took part in the 2023 round of the National Composite Index of Family Planning (NCIFP), described in more detail below. We focus on sub-Saharan Africa because many country programs have been dependent on donor funding which is decreasing and may be facing challenges with domestic financing and other aspects of sustainable programs. Understanding the state of program sustainability from the perspective of program experts, and both

similar and unique challenges faced by countries will help shape the design of support to strengthen the capacity of countries to move towards sustainability.

Methods

Building on the Family Planning Effort (FPE) score, measured over several decades of family planning programming starting in the 1970s (Kuang & Brodsky, 2016; Lapham & Mauldin, 1984; Mauldin & Ross, 1991; Ross & Stover, 2001), The NCIFP was developed to support measurement efforts by the global initiative Family Planning 2020 (FP2020, now FP2030) to capture indicators related to an enabling policy environment and a rights-based approach to FP services. The NCIFP, fielded in 2014, 2017, 2021 and 2023, focuses on FP policies, plans and structures, including data systems, that pertain to quality of care, choice, accountability, and equity (see https://www.track20.org/pages/data_analysis/policy/NCIFP.php).

The NCIFP uses a key informant approach, identifying 12-15 experts in each country who have a comprehensive understanding of the FP program. Data collection at the country-level was managed by a Track20 Monitoring and Evaluation Officer (M&E Officer) or a local consultant who was familiar with the national FP program and could identify people who could gauge the effort levels of its various features. To obtain a variety of perspectives, respondents worked in four different capacities: inside the FP program, in government but outside the FP Program (e.g. Parliamentarians), in local civil society organizations (CSOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private entities, in local academic or research organizations, and resident staff of international agencies.

The 2023 round of the NCIFP incorporated a supplementary dimension at the end of the standard NCIFP questionnaire designed to provide information on the sustainability of the national FP program. The questions included items related to donor dependency, coordination, FP in country plans for Universal Health Coverage (UHC), and planning for future demand (please refer to the supplementary questions in the 2023 NCIFP questionnaire shown in **Box 1**). In addition to the six close-ended questions about specific sustainability issues, respondents were also asked to list the three largest barriers to sustainability in their county. More details about the analysis will be provided in the full paper.

Box 1. NCIFP 2023 Supplementary Questions on Sustainability

This final set of questions is unique to the 2023 NCIFP. This section is meant to capture information on the sustainability of the family planning program.

SUPPLEMENT 1. Extent to which the national family planning program is reliant on donor agencies for funding each of the following: (1 = not at all reliant; 10 = extremely reliant)

Note: For this question, you must rate each of the following areas separately.

- Contraceptive commodities
- Program activities

SUPPLEMENT 2. Extent to which the government coordinates funding mechanisms across sources (national and local government funding, donor financing, in-kind contributions, etc.). (1 = not at all; 10 = highly coordinated)

SUPPLEMENT 3. Extent to which the health management information system (HMIS) supports timely and complete reporting of data to inform monitoring and planning. (1 = not at all; 10 = extremely effective)

SUPPLEMENT 4. Extent to which the logistics management information system (LMIS) supports timely and complete reporting of data to inform commodity management. (1 = not at all; 10 = extremely effective)

SUPPLEMENT 5. Extent to which family planning is part of the country's plans for Universal Health Care (UHC). (1 = not at all; 10 = extremely important)

SUPPLEMENT 6. Extent to which the government has developed plans to make the national family planning program more sustainable to achieve each of the following: (1 = not at all; 10 = extremely strong effort)

Note: for this question, you must rate each of the following areas separately.

- Reduced reliance on donors
- Realistic projections of commodities needed to meet demand
- Adequate recruitment of skilled staff to meet demand
- Adequate fielding of staff to meet demand
- Adequate infrastructure and equipment to meet demand
- Programmatic support from leaders at the subnational level

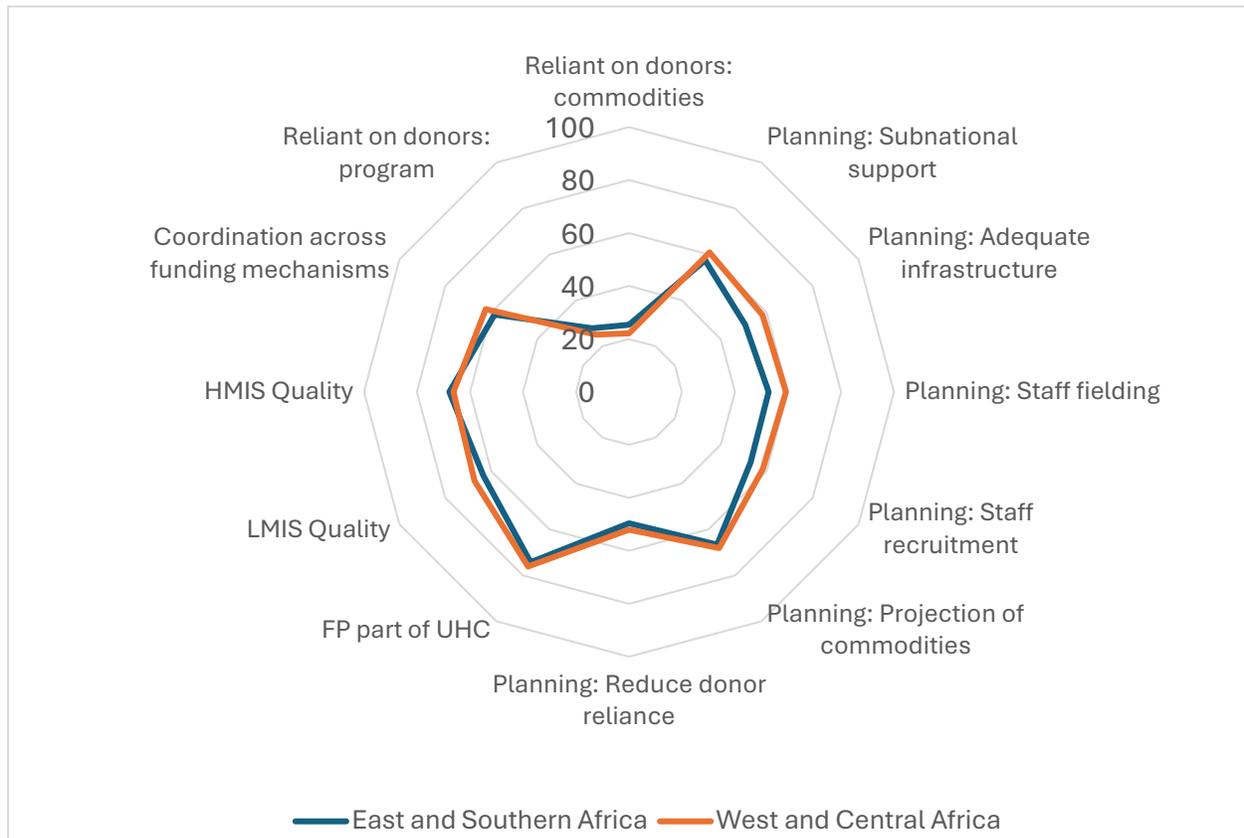
SUPPLEMENT 7. In your opinion, what are the three largest barriers to sustainability for the family planning program in your country? (Open ended)

Findings

Figure 1 shows the scores for each of the 12 sustainability items, by region. Both regions scored highest on the extent to which FP is included in plans for Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and lowest on the items related to donor dependency, indicating that governments are highly dependent on donors for contraceptive commodities and programmatic support.

Each of the items in the sustainability supplement represent different components of the sustainability of a family planning program. To gain a better understanding of country performance along the various components of sustainability, we will generate scores for each of the sub-topics within the Sustainability Supplement, namely donor reliance, UHC, Coordination, Data Systems and Planning. We will also compare findings from the sustainability supplement with the findings from the standard NCIFP (see https://www.track20.org/pages/data_analysis/policy/NCIFP.php for more detail on the NCIFP). We will also analyze scores for each sustainability component for each country in the two sub-regions.

Figure 1. Sustainability items, by SSA Region



Key barriers to sustainability of the family planning program

As a final question in the supplement on sustainability, respondents were asked to give their top three barriers to sustainability. Very few NCIFP respondents gave no response or said their country faced no barriers; in fact, respondents had a lot to say about barriers to sustainability. **Table 2**, the barrier most often identified by respondents in both ESA and WCA was, not surprisingly, the dependence on donors for funding and lack of domestic financing. Among all 1,257 possible responses, 25% related to financing, including for commodities. This seemingly low percentage obscures the finding that financing was the first barrier mentioned by half (52%) of the 228 respondents from ESA (51%) and the 191 respondents from WCA (52%) (not shown).

As shown above in Figure 1, the two questions on reliance on donors (for programs and commodities) received the lowest scores across all of the questions on sustainability, meaning that many family planning programs in both SAA regions remain heavily reliant on donor funding. While the score related to coordination across funding mechanisms received a score of around 60 across the two regions, when asked about plans to make the national family planning program more sustainable by reducing reliance on donors, respondents in both regions responded with a middling score (around 50 in each region), indicating that more work is needed to ensure sufficient domestic resources for the FP program.

‘Human resources, number and training’ was also noted in 10 percent or more of the possible three responses under ‘program/service delivery’ barriers (15% in ESA and 12% in WCA). As shown in Figure 1, scores indicating plans for adequate recruitment of skilled staff to meet demand and adequate fielding of staff to meet demand received higher scores in WCA (around 60%) than in ESA (around 50%). Scores in both regions indicate room for improvement in sustainability of human resources for the family planning program.

Programming component	Identified barrier to sustainability	ESA (17 countries)	WCA (16 countries)	Average across sub-regions
Enabling Environment	Domestic financing; donor dependence	23%	27%	25%
	Political will; policy issues; accountability	8%	6%	7%
	Coordination; planning; competing interests	2%	4%	3%
	Private sector engagement	2%	1%	1%
Program/ service delivery (Institutional)	Human resources, number and training	15%	12%	14%
	Commodities; supply chain	9%	14%	11%
	Infrastructure; coverage; access	8%	7%	7%
	Quality of care/services	4%	3%	4%
	Data; M&E	2%	4%	3%
Social behavior change (SBC) (demand)	Sociocultural, gender, religious barriers	10%	9%	10%
	Insufficient attention to SBC	5%	6%	5%
Other		3%	1%	2%
No response		9%	7%	8%
Total number of responses (each country’s number of respondents x 3)		684	573	1,257

No response (NR) is included in the percentage calculations because some respondents listed one or two barriers.

Also under program/service delivery barriers, commodity/supply chain issues were noted in 11% of responses across the regions). It is instructive to consider resources and commodities together since most responses about funding in the open-ended question did not differentiate between funding for programming and/or commodities.

In response to the open-ended question, respondents also highlighted the social dimensions of barriers to sustainability. Ten percent of respondents across the regions noted barriers to sustainability related to sociocultural and gender norms and practices and to religious objections, with an additional five percent calling out insufficient attention to SBC by their countries’ FP programs.

Discussion

Further analysis will unpack findings by country. Taking a closer look at respondents' perceptions of barriers at the country level is anticipated to show both common barriers faced and differences across countries in the prioritization of barriers. The number of themes that emerged in the preliminary analysis shows the range of barriers respondents who are familiar with the FP program in their countries see the program facing on the path to sustainability. Most countries in these two sub-regions of sub-Saharan Africa face not only financial resources but a range of other program and social behavior change-related barriers. Looking at the percentages of responses within countries will give a snapshot of what barriers are considered most pressing in each country setting. The findings are useful for countries and donors focused on ensuring long-term sustainability of FP programs in sub-Saharan Africa.

These data from 2023 provide an important snapshot of family planning programs across 33 countries in two subregions of Sub-Saharan prior to the abrupt shift in donor funding. While the landscape for programs and their sustainability in these countries has drastically changed, the findings from the 2023 NCIFP provide an important base of evidence. Understanding program experts' perspectives, and identifying similar and unique challenges countries face, is critical to help shape support to strengthen the capacity of countries to move towards FP program sustainability. This analysis is instructive in highlighting the range of financial and other barriers programs face in achieving sustainability in FP. It points to the need for innovative approaches (without the benefit of phased out funding) to address common challenges across countries and unique, country-specific, challenges with enabling environment, including financial sustainability; programing and services; and attention to social-cultural, gender, and religious barriers, which affect demand and shape the ability of programs to sustainability meet demand for voluntary and rights-based FP.