

Prioritizing the newborn agenda through policy change in Zambia

THE BIG PICTURE

Over the past two decades, the Government of Zambia has made strong commitments to improving child health. But while the country has made great strides in reducing deaths of children under five, Zambia's high neonatal mortality rate has remained too high. A strong group of civil society advocates identified the absence of newborn-focused policies and strategies at the national level as a key contributor to this lack of progress. Over a three-year period, the coalition worked side-by-side with government officials to increase commitment to improving newborn health and institute a series of targeted newborn health policies—including a Newborn Health Care Scale Up Framework, revised Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (IMCI) standards that included neonatal guidelines, and a set of Essential Newborn Care (ENC) Guidelines—that could translate into specific action to save newborns' lives.

IDENTIFYING THE POLICY CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

For nearly 20 years, Zambia's infant and neonatal mortality rates have remained at about 70 and 30 out of every 1000 live births, respectively, with an infant mortality rate among the highest in the world. Despite Zambia being 1 of 13 African countries on track to reach the targets laid out in Millennium Development Goal 4—reducing deaths of children younger than five—the country has failed to reduce deaths of infants and in particular newborns, due to lack of strategies focusing on this target population. Zambia is one of a number of sub-Saharan African countries where this trend has been prevalent in recent years.

Concerned about this lack of progress, PATH convened civil society advocates for a workshop focused on child health in late 2011. Together, the group agreed that the country's lack of newborn health policies was a gap that must be addressed before the government could be expected to significantly increase funding or services for newborn care. Three years earlier, in 2008, the government had started work on a newborn policy framework, but due to competing priorities and a lack of clear ownership, the framework was never completed. Since that time, the document had lain dormant.



David Jacobs

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The coalition—which also included Save the Children, the Pediatric Association of Zambia, the Centre for Infectious Disease Research in Zambia, Zambia Centre for Applied Health Research, World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, University Teaching Hospital, the Zambia Centre for Applied Health Research/Boston University, World Vision International, and Clinton Health Access Initiative—decided that instead of beginning anew, they might be able to rally the government to revive that earlier process. As the coalition developed their policy advocacy strategy, they also assessed the national and global landscape to identify assets they might have for achieving the necessary momentum.

As it happened, several key developments provided potential opportunities to help them garner enthusiasm and move the process forward. Locally, Zambia's first lady was publicly advocating for increased attention to newborn health. And at the global level, the new Every Newborn Action Plan was setting the stage for increased focus on, and funding for, neonatal health.

IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

Leveraging this momentum and building on the earlier policy work, the group began rallying support from the government, particularly the recently formed Ministry of Community Development, Mother and Child Health Ministry. While advocates provided evidence about new technologies, interventions, and global recommendations on newborn health and also generated a steady drumbeat of attention for the issue, key champions within the new agency were able to secure internal buy-in from their peers and a commitment to reviving the policy.

Over the next four months, through a highly consultative process that involved regular meetings, small group discussions, and wider stakeholder briefings, civil society and the government worked together to prepare drafts of a newborn framework based on the latest WHO guidelines. The frequent consultation proved key to moving the process forward, developing relationships, and creating a groundswell of support—including gaining the necessary commitments to act from officials throughout the Ministry.

Eventually, the draft was ready for signature. However, the group was concerned that the document might go unsigned at the government's highest levels, dooming the policy to failure again.

ACHIEVING THE POLICY GOAL

The coalition decided to press the issue to ensure that the framework was signed and put into action. In April 2013, the Global Newborn Health Conference was held in Johannesburg, South Africa. Advocates offered to sponsor a conference delegation, which would include high-level Ministry representatives who could present Zambia's new policy framework and establish its commitment to the issue on a global stage. The delegation shared the policy development process and previewed the framework at the conference, with the result that the Minister signed the framework into action after the conference. Three months later in July 2013, the Newborn Health Care Framework for Scale Up was formally launched in Zambia. Held in public and broadcast on television, the visibility of the launch demonstrated political will for the issue, sustained the momentum that had been built, and laid the groundwork for further policy action.

This spotlight was important because the advocates weren't done yet. The Newborn Framework was a good start, but other policies needed to be put in place to ensure that change would make their way to communities. Leveraging their



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- Identify the advocacy issue.
- State the policy goal.
- Identify decision makers and influencers.
- Identify the interests of the decision makers and influencers.
- Clarify opposition and potential obstacles facing your issue.
- Define your advocacy assets and gaps.
- Identify key partners.
- State the tactics you need to reach your goal.
- Define your most powerful messages.
- Determine how you'll measure success.

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momentum, the group managed to influence the finalization of the country's IMCI strategy document, which had lain dormant for years, and to include specific strategic approaches for newborn care. Finalizing the IMCI strategy document while incorporating the issue of newborn health was important to further solidify government commitment, as well as to ensure that neonatal care was integrated into broader maternal and child health programs and initiatives in the future through a nationally approved strategic approach. The IMCI strategy document was signed in December 2013.

One key policy remained, which would allow the advocates to carry through their newborn policy agenda. A set of ENC Guidelines was drafted to create the basis for newborn care training materials and ENC protocols within the healthcare system. These guidelines provide the justification and rationale for the government to allocate funding and resources for newborn health to healthcare workers, facilities, and communities across the country.

To ensure that the guidelines were finalized and adopted, the advocates capitalized on government interest in another global event: the launch of the Every Newborn Action Plan at the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health Forum in South Africa in July 2014, which was attended by the Minister. Immediately upon returning from the Forum, the final ENC Guidelines were signed and then launched in October 2014.

FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

- **Leveraging global and local “moments of opportunity” can help move the policy change process forward.** As a part of their strategy, advocates were able to identify and leverage a global movement and related convenings, as well as a recently formed Ministry with potential new champions, to foster interest and accelerate policy change within Zambia.
- **Consensus building is critical for extensive, long-lasting policy changes.** The group didn't “reinvent the wheel” but rather built upon a previous policy process for its first policy “win.” They identified a common interest among civil society and key government champions and then slowly and patiently moved a complex alliance to agreement and policy action.
- **Investments in consultation can foster significant returns in the form of cultivating champions and gaining political buy-in.** Without a consultative process that respected the government's authority and boundaries, policy action likely would have been sidelined once again. However, a methodical approach that prioritized respect and multiple perspectives paid off in high-level commitment and sustainable policy action.



PATH/Cristina Herdman

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