POLICY ENVIRONMENT:
UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT FOR CONTRACEPTIVE SECURITY

Achieving contraceptive security requires coordination among the many elements of family planning programs, including funding, procurement, supply chain, and services. Underlying factors that contribute to the success and sustainability of these program efforts are an enabling policy environment, political commitment, and effective policies. A supportive policy environment includes not only the formulation and implementation of appropriate policies and the allocation of sufficient resources, but also a broad political consensus that family planning programs are necessary for the well-being of individuals, families, and society.

Efforts to improve the policy environment for contraceptive security generally require the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders. Senior government leaders and civil servants are critical stakeholders because they have the authority to make policy and programmatic changes. However, behind those changes is the active support and involvement of civil and community leaders from the public sector, the private sector, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other influential leaders at the national and local levels. This brief examines the importance of advocacy, data use, and capacity-building in creating and sustaining political commitment, and the roles that stakeholders from government, civil society, and the private sector play in efforts to achieve contraceptive security.

Political Support Is Necessary for Family Planning to Thrive

Most countries have demonstrated basic levels of political support for family planning by signing the Programme of Action that emerged from the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. Similarly, global support for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other international agreements also indicates a degree of political commitment to reproductive health and family planning.

At the national level, the existence of reproductive health and family planning policies and programs and contraceptive security strategies within ministries of health further demonstrate commitment to contraceptive security.

However, deeper political commitment requires looking at other ways that support is given. A program’s organizational structure can also reveal how a government expresses political commitment. For example, Kenya’s National Coordinating Agency for Population and Development, which is a semiautonomous government entity charged with ensuring that population growth remains on the national agenda, is indicative of a commitment to population issues at the national level. Madagascar’s health ministry was renamed the Ministry of Health and Family Planning to demonstrate greater political support for family planning and contraceptive security. Similarly, Pakistan’s creation of a Ministry of Population Welfare suggests that family planning and reproductive health are a priority to the national government.

Political support for family planning and contraceptive security also translates into specific demonstrations of commitment and the availability of resources. In Rwanda, a high level of political support is visible through the inclusion of family planning in development strategies (see Box 1). Sufficient funding and staffing levels are important signs of political support for family planning. Peru’s creation of a protected budget line item for contraceptives and designating them as “strategic commodities” also reflect the government’s commitment to contraceptive security. These examples illustrate different...
Civil Society Improves the Policy Environment for Family Planning

Civil society—which includes NGOs, women’s groups, professional associations, and the media, among other actors—can play an important role in improving the policy environment for family planning and contraceptive security. Civil society can be involved in policy development by taking the role of raising awareness about contraceptive security issues, undertaking advocacy efforts for supportive policies and improved access to services, and fostering policy dialogue among stakeholders on issues related to family planning policies and programs. In Mali, civil society engaged religious leaders in policy dialogue to gain their support for family planning and contraceptive security.

Building consensus within civil society and between civil society and policymaking groups (such as ministries, parliamentarians, and district health teams) is another vital role of civil society in supporting contraceptive security. Implementing policies should involve civil society through providing services, continuing to advocate for accountability, and supporting the development of operational guidelines. Civil society often monitors the implementation of family planning programs and policies, serving as a watchdog to ensure that governments fulfill their obligations.

Through awareness-raising activities, civil society can provide critical information to policymakers that support decisionmaking. The use of timely information can also support advocacy efforts. In many countries, civil society has used data, such as applications of the RAPID model, market segmentation analysis, national health accounts, and reproductive health subaccounts, to support its causes (see Box 2). Civil society can raise awareness about contraceptive security by drawing on data related to the market for contraceptives, groups not being served, and future anticipated demand for family planning from the public and private sectors. By using data effectively, civil society mobilizes responses to a range of contraceptive security issues.

Civil society also has a role in directing advocacy efforts that reinforce the importance of contraceptive security on the national policy agenda (see Box 3). Advocacy efforts have successfully led to many policy changes at the local and national levels, addressing key issues such as identifying target audiences for government services, increasing and ensuring funding for contraceptives, and expanding the role of community-based providers—to mention a few examples. Civil society groups in Guatemala successfully advocated to the congress for a law that would increase funding for family planning and reproductive health based on a tax on the sale of alcohol.

Engaging civil society in policy dialogue helps ensure that policy changes are responsive to a broad group of stakeholders. Civil society’s participation in the process to achieve consensus on contraceptive security contributes to its ownership of and commitment to policy recommendations that result from the process. It is also useful to engage the private and commercial sectors in dialogue, because their input can help government policymakers better understand how current or proposed policies may affect their involvement in contraceptive security efforts.

An Enabling Environment for the Private Sector

An important public-sector function in addressing contraceptive security is coordinating the involvement of the public, commercial, and NGO sectors. The public sector can further engage the private sector by creating and implementing policies that segment the family planning market and foster appropriate roles for the public, commercial, and NGO sectors. To ensure the active participation of private and public sectors, public-sector leadership is needed to develop a comprehensive contraceptive security strategy that supports an enabling policy environment. To foster
greater involvement of the private sector in the family planning market, the public sector can work to eliminate restrictive importation and tax policies that limit the number of contraceptive products that are available. Similarly, public-sector efforts such as targeting subsidized or free contraceptives only to certain groups—rather than to the entire public—can also enhance demand for private-sector involvement in family planning among the untargeted groups. These changes in the policy environment can facilitate the growth of the private sector, which in turn, will allow the public sector to use its limited resources to respond to the family planning needs of the underserved.\(^6\)

One challenge to involving the private sector is that it is composed of many different types of organizations—private pharmacies, individual practitioners, clinics and hospitals, and retailers—that are not necessarily organized into a cohesive group. As a result, it may be difficult to find the appropriate organizations or individuals for partnerships. However, professional organizations, industry groups, or civil society groups may be able to work with the public sector to address contraceptive security issues, and serve as an information conduit to related organizations or individuals (see Box 4).\(^7\)

For the private sector to be willing to be involved in contraceptive security, it needs both an adequate market to tap into and a financial incentive. An effective approach used by some contraceptive security committees is to segment the family planning market so that the commercial sector focuses its resources on those people who are most able to pay higher prices; social marketing and NGO programs direct efforts toward the lower- and middle-income groups; and the public sector reaches the poor and underserved.

Addressing Contraceptive Security in Decentralized Settings

A global initiative in health-sector reform has led to decentralizing many functions of national ministries of health to subnational levels, which includes states, districts, and municipalities. This type of transition increases local autonomy to identify programmatic and budgeting priorities. Decentralization should also lead to better management, greater efficiency, and higher quality of services, and make local programs more responsive to market forces, local needs, and local decisionmakers.

As decentralization moves forward, contraceptive security efforts will also need to expand so that they include subnational levels, where an increasing number of decisions are made (see Box 6). Without strong political commitment at both the national and subnational levels, local decisionmakers may lack the capacity to manage their new and expanded responsibilities. Commitments to family planning and contraceptive security, as well as
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national commitments to the Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development and the Millennium Development Goals may not translate into local priorities without adequate direction.

Through decentralization, the roles of the national health sector often shift toward coordination, norms, and stewardship. Decisionmakers at subnational levels increasingly identify program priorities and determine how resources will be allocated. To ensure that support for family planning programs remains a priority at the local level, national governments can provide leadership in developing a strategy and action plan that both strengthens the policy environment for contraceptive security and supports the capacity of subnational decisionmakers. Subnational governments may be expected to take on additional responsibilities that include developing policies that reflect local priorities and realities. To ensure that contraceptive security remains a priority, subnational political leaders, health officials, and civil society need to have a solid understanding of key family planning and contraceptive security issues, as well as skills in consensus building and conflict resolution.

Next Steps

The policy environment for contraceptive security is complex and it poses challenges. An enabling policy environment is critical for family planning programs to be responsive to the needs of women and men. At both the national and subnational levels, efforts to raise political commitment and increase the involvement of civil society and the private sector have proved successful, and are contributing to improved and sustained access to high-quality family planning programs. To foster an enabling policy environment for contraceptive security, stakeholders need to:

BOX 4

Private-Sector Engagement in Contraceptive Security

One approach to increasing the private sector’s commitment to contraceptive security is to include representatives from that sector on contraceptive security committees. Because family planning generally has a low profit margin compared with other areas of health, involving the commercial sector may be challenging. Nevertheless, the private sector is a stakeholder in contraceptive security. Some of the following are examples of groups that could provide a private-sector perspective to the process:

- Associations of medical, nursing, and midwifery professionals.
- NGOs involved in family planning and reproductive health.
- Social marketing franchises.
- Associations of professional women who have an interest in women’s reproductive health.
- Service organizations (for example, Rotary and Rotoract).
- Youth organizations (for example, Africa Youth Alliance).

In addition, many private sector organizations—including pharmaceutical manufacturers—have been involved in family planning research and interventions around the world. These past partners could be tapped again for further involvement in contraceptive security efforts.

BOX 5

Whole Market Approach—Two Examples

Involving the private sector in family planning is a critical aspect of achieving contraceptive security in most developing countries. The following examples illustrate how, through segmenting the market and targeting those smaller segments with specific products and services, the whole market approach can stimulate the private sector to reach a larger share of the market for family planning services and products.

In Nigeria, there was no mid-priced commercial brand of oral contraceptives available. Indian and Thai manufacturers of generic oral contraceptives were interested, but did not have the funds to position the new product in the Nigerian market. A local social marketing organization committed the time and resources to introduce the new product, which ultimately led to a newly formulated contraceptive at an affordable price being introduced into a market where choice had been limited.

In Ukraine, the public sector referred clients to the commercial sector for contraceptives, which meant that method choice was limited and prices were very high. To foster a whole market approach, the “Together for Health” project focused on the middle class by developing and promoting a contraceptive product line made up of commodities already in the market-place but not actively promoted by the pharmaceutical companies. The program also worked with the government to procure the products that are included in the mid-priced product lines so the poor would also have access to affordable family planning methods.

Sources:
• Advocate for visible demonstrations by policymakers of commitment to family planning and contraceptive security through statements by national leaders and by including family planning in development strategy documents.

• Foster a supportive environment for greater involvement of the commercial and private sectors in addressing contraceptive security.

• Build the capacity of decisionmakers and civil society in decentralized settings so that contraceptive security remains a priority at subnational levels.

• Use timely data and information—market segmentation analysis, national health accounts, and reproductive health subaccounts—as the basis for awareness-raising efforts by civil society and evidence-based decisionmaking by policymakers.

• Become familiar with the different advocacy rationales to support family planning and contraceptive security, especially the economic and health benefits.

Acknowledgments
James Gribble is vice president of International Programs at the Population Reference Bureau. This brief was written with assistance from Gloria Coe, Carmen Coles, and Linda Cahaelen of the Office of Population and Reproductive Health, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Thanks to these individuals and to Alan Bornbusch and Kevin Pilz of USAID; Margot Fahnstock and Tarvi Pandit-Rajani of Futures Group; and Barbara O’Hanlon of O’Hanlon Health Consulting for providing information and review. This brief and the Contraceptive Security Toolkit were funded by USAID under the BRIDGE Project (Cooperative Agreement CPO-A-00-03-00004-00).

References


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