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## ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN NAROK COUNTY IN DECISIONMAKING IMPROVES YOUTH-FRIENDLY FAMILY PLANNING SERVICES

16.7

Median age of first sexual intercourse for women ages 20 to 49 in Narok County.

38%

Share of married women ages 15 to 49 in Narok currently using a modern method of contraception.

40%

Share of women ages 15 to 19 in Narok with a live birth or pregnant with their first child, compared to 18% nationally.

Young people's well-being shapes the health, development, and economic growth of the larger community. This relationship is particularly true in Narok County, Kenya, where more than half of the population is under age 15. As Narok's young people transition to adulthood, investments in their reproductive health can lay the groundwork for good health and greater opportunities for them and for the county. Including young people in the decisionmaking surrounding those investments can help ensure health programs' success.

The *Kenya Health Sector Strategic Plan*, for instance, underscores the government's commitment to achieving UHC as a national priority that ensures "that all individuals and communities in Kenya have access to good-quality essential health services without suffering from financial hardship."

Given Kenya's national policy environment, counties have a responsibility to translate national policies into programs and services that meet young people's needs. Yet in many counties, including Narok, current health programs do not fulfill national policy commitments, and many young people do not have access to services that are tailored to their needs.

This policy brief details the results of focus group discussions with youth ages 15 to 24 and in-depth interviews of key stakeholders conducted in Narok Town in 2017 and 2018, which assessed gaps between policy commitments and implementation of youth-friendly services in Narok County.<sup>1</sup> The assessment found that many young people do not have access to youth-friendly family planning services. Many health facilities struggle to retain young clients for continuing care. In addition, while decisionmakers occasionally consult young people during policy creation at the national level, young people are rarely involved in decisionmaking concerning youth-friendly family planning services. This brief identifies how the Narok County

### BOX 1

#### National Policies That Support Youth-Friendly Family Planning Services

Kenya has an inclusive and supportive policy environment for the provision of sexual and reproductive health services to both youth and adolescents.

- National Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy, 2015.
- National Guidelines for the Provision of Adolescent and Youth Friendly Services, 2016.
- National Family Planning Costed Implementation Plan 2017-2020.
- National Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health Policy Implementation Framework 2017-2021.

Health Management Team (CHMT) can seize a unique opportunity to engage young people in decisionmaking to help ensure that sexual and reproductive health (SRH) programs and policies are tailored to their needs.

#### Narok County Can Improve SRH Outcomes With Youth-Friendly Services

Narok County's SRH indicators lag behind national-level indicators, suggesting that progress is still needed to meet Kenya's commitments to reduce teenage pregnancy and increase adolescent modern contraceptive prevalence.

On average, young women in Narok have their first sexual encounter before age 17. Despite widespread knowledge of at least one modern method of contraception, fewer than four out of

10 young women use a modern method. This limited use of modern methods exposes young women to unintended pregnancies and leads to high levels of adolescent childbearing in the county: Two out of five Narok women ages 15 to 19 have had a live birth or are pregnant with their first child.<sup>2</sup> When women have children at young ages, they are at greater risk of illness or even death and may lose opportunities to pursue education, training, or meaningful employment.

## YOUTH-FRIENDLY SERVICES LEAD TO IMPROVED SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that policymakers make contraceptive services youth-friendly to increase contraceptive use among young people.<sup>3</sup> According to WHO, family planning services are considered youth-friendly when they are accessible, acceptable, appropriate, effective, and equitable for adolescents and youth.<sup>4</sup> Youth-friendly family planning services should also respect the diversity among this population. Each young person has unique SRH needs that are complex, changing, and varied, and providers need to give services and counsel in a manner that respects the diverse expectations of each individual.<sup>5</sup>

Policies and programs that include common service-delivery and supportive environment elements can improve knowledge of family planning and contraceptive services, increase community acceptance of adolescent contraceptive use, and generate greater access to and demand for contraceptive services among young people.<sup>6</sup> Family Planning High Impact Practices (HIPs) detail these elements in the Adolescent-Friendly Contraceptive Services HIP Enhancement brief (see Box 2).

## Increasing Youth Engagement Helps Achieve National Health Goals, Including Family Planning Goals

Policymakers can ensure family planning services meet the needs of young people by including them in the decisionmaking process for policies and programs that impact their lives. In December 2018, Kenya's president launched UHC in four counties (Kisumu, Nyeri, Isiolo, and Machakos) to scale up access to essential services, including family planning.<sup>7</sup> Even though adolescents and youth constitute a significant portion of the Kenyan population, their views are often not reflected in conversations, including their diverse SRH needs, ideas, and perspectives within the

### BOX 2

## Family Planning High Impact Practices

The Family Planning High Impact Practices (HIPs) are a set of evidence-based family planning practices that contribute to increased use of contraception. The Adolescent-Friendly Contraceptive Services HIP Enhancement can provide particular guidance for program staff working with adolescents.

Its practices include:

- Train and support providers to offer adolescent-friendly contraceptive services.
- Enforce confidentiality and audio/visual privacy.
- Offer a wide range of contraception.
- Provide no-cost or subsidized services.
- Build an enabling legal and political environment.
- Link service delivery with activities that build support in communities.
- Address gender and social norms.

**Source:** "Adolescent-Friendly Contraceptive Services: Mainstreaming Adolescent-Friendly Elements Into Existing Contraceptive Services" (HIP), accessed at [www.fphighimpactpractices.org/briefs/adolescent-friendly-contraceptive-services/](http://www.fphighimpactpractices.org/briefs/adolescent-friendly-contraceptive-services/), on June 20, 2018.

UHC implementation strategies.<sup>8</sup> As Kenya embarks on the journey to achieving its commitments to UHC and the Vision 2030 agenda, intentionally and meaningfully engaging youth in UHC implementation is critical.<sup>9</sup>

Institutions that include and listen to young people during decisionmaking processes are more likely to develop and implement programs that reflect young people's needs and experiences and use resources more efficiently.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, policymakers gain an understanding of how preferences vary among groups. Youth engagement should go beyond consultations and include commitments from policymakers to include young people in budget discussions and annual planning meetings.<sup>11</sup>

Meaningful youth engagement in decisionmaking not only provides a youth perspective but ensures human rights and builds youth capacity as leaders in the community, both today and in the future.<sup>12</sup> It also bolsters the community's understanding of issues that affect young people.<sup>13</sup> As young people become advocates in programs and services, they can play a role in contributing to Kenya's national commitments to improve its citizens' health.

## Research Findings Show a Need for Youth Engagement in Narok County

Research from focus group discussions with youth and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders highlighted young people's dissatisfaction with family planning information and services in Narok County, as well as instances of successful engagement.<sup>14</sup>

- Young people feel unheard and neglected by county officials, who often only interact with members of the County Assembly and political leaders around elections.
- Youth feel that youth engagement is a token act and true decisionmaking takes place behind closed doors.
- Youth are uncomfortable accessing services that are frequented by older members of the community. Few spaces or opportunities exist for youth to learn about contraception.
- Youth find it difficult to speak openly about SRH, especially if they are unmarried or women.
- Policymakers often fail to acknowledge young people's needs and perceive that providing youth with contraception will "corrupt them."
- Youth feel a lack of trust and respect for their perspectives.
- Proactive youth will often organize their own youth-led groups to inform each other about family planning.
- Policymakers have consulted with youth to strategize methods to address teenage pregnancy.
- County stakeholders noted a lack of formal structures to consistently engage directly with youth.

## What Can Decisionmakers Do to Increase Youth Engagement?

Decisionmakers, including Narok's CHMT, should:

- Meaningfully engage young people in the integration of family planning and adolescent and youth SRH in UHC to realize youth-friendly services in government health facilities in Narok County. UHC ensures that every citizen has access to the quality health care services that they need by limiting financial difficulties or the risk of impoverishment.
- Ensure that family planning services and commodities are part of the essential health care packages at primary health care facilities.

- Take additional steps to include youth voices and priorities during budget discussions and annual planning meetings concerning programs that directly affect youth well-being.

## OPPORTUNITIES TO SUSTAIN YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN EXISTING GOVERNMENT STRUCTURES

Through their active participation and empowerment, youth will make informed decisions regarding their SRH and meaningfully contribute to other development sectors. Decisionmakers in Narok County should sustain youth representation within current government structures through the following strategies:

- **The CHMT board should create a position for a young person to lead and influence decisions** concerning the county's adoption of UHC and prioritization of adolescent and youth SRH and youth-friendly contraceptive services in the UHC package.
- **Support the efforts of the Narok IYAFP Youth Technical Working Group and incorporate their feedback** into the budget and annual planning meetings. Only when young people can participate in decisionmaking will family planning services be tailored to their needs.
- **Establish seats for youth voting members** in CHMT budget decisions. This arrangement can increase youth visibility and create spaces for young people to learn and engage with policymakers.
- **Support young people's outreach efforts** to work alongside community leaders in Narok to bolster community understanding of issues that affect young people.

If given the opportunity to work with decisionmakers, young people can play an important role in ensuring that Narok County health programs meet their needs, fulfill national policy commitments, and strengthen opportunities for communities throughout the county.

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