Building a framework for cataloguing the evidence on the effectiveness of adolescent reproductive health programming

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Extended abstract

Introduction

The design of effective and efficient programming for adolescent reproductive health (ARH) in low- and middle-income countries requires good evidence of what programs work and why they work. While there is often good information from process evaluations on how to carry out given scopes of work for ARH programs, and there are findings from general research on issues and correlates related to ARH, the rigorous evidence for what kind of ARH interventions achieve the highest marginal effects is limited, particularly for low- and middle-income countries. A search of a comprehensive impact evaluation repository for international development returns just 14 completed impact evaluations and systematic reviews on the topic published from 1990 to 2012. There is an urgent need to fund new impact evaluations (counterfactual-based studies of impact) of ARH programs in order to build the evidence base.

Investment decisions for new impact evaluations should be made strategically, however. There are limited resources, and impact evaluations can be costly. In order to inform these investment decisions, we are undertaking a scoping study, which will catalogue the current evidence base

and measure the demand for evidence for the various program types and outcomes under the ARH theme.

The backbone for the data collection and analysis in the scoping study is a framework that presents interventions and outcomes in a detailed matrix representing current practice and reflecting the prevailing theories of change. Thus, the first task for the scoping study is building that framework. The challenges include selecting, naming and grouping interventions and outcomes to encompass the conceptual frameworks and terminology of the various governments, implementers, and funders working in ARH.

Methods

Our approach to building the framework for this scoping study starts with desk-study background research and then moves to a highly consultative process involving multiple iterations with various stakeholders. The background research includes a literature review that emphasizes research on possible theories of change for adolescent reproductive health. We review the strategy papers and concept documents from the primary international organizations working in the sector. We also conduct a rapid portfolio review to list and describe the types of ARH programs most prevalent in low- and middle-income countries.

We will then hold three consultation workshops in early 2016 in order to gather input for building the framework. The format for these workshops will be updated from that used in prior consultation workshops for other scoping frameworks.

With the input from the background research and the consultations, we will develop a draft framework and write a discussion paper including descriptions of the included theories of

change and the explanation of how different national and international conceptual frameworks are reflected. We will then engage various stakeholders from the consultation to review and comment on the draft framework. The ACSHR would provide a valuable opportunity for consultation on the draft framework before we move to the next stage of the scoping study.

We will then use the framework to build an evidence gap map, for which we populate the matrix with impact evaluations and systematic reviews reflecting the evidence provided. The evidence gap map methodology is adapted from standard systematic review methodology. We conduct a comprehensive search according to a strategy based on the framework and screen for inclusion and exclusion according to a strict protocol. We will also conduct a large sample survey of stakeholders in order to assess evidence needs across the interventions and outcomes in the ARH evidence framework. The scoping paper will present the analysis of the supply of evidence, catalogued in the evidence gap map, together with the demand for evidence, assessed through the survey and other qualitative data collection.

Findings and discussion

The framework will present an overview of the conceptual and theoretical models underpinning current ARH programming in low- and middle-income countries. Important features include the groupings of interventions to reflect similar mechanisms and the selection of other study features to be coded in the evidence gap map. Past maps have included cost effectiveness, gender, and youth as other features. The discussion of the framework will help to ground truth it.

Recommendations and references

The ultimate recommendations coming from the scoping study will be the identification of priority questions for investments in impact evaluations of ARH programs. We will incorporate the recommendations from all consultations to refine the framework for subsequent work.