

Strengthening Local Research Capacity through Small Grants

March 2023

Background

Family planning (FP) policies and practices should be grounded in scientific evidence. This is why the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Office of Population and Reproductive Health (PRH) has played a critical role in supporting FP research and is a core partner in FP2030, which prioritizes evidence and innovation to improve access, quality, and uptake of voluntary FP services around the world. Yet opportunities to lead FP research studies are largely unattainable, both technically and financially, for those living in the very countries being studied. An analysis of authorship trends in *The Lancet Global Health* found that only 35 percent of the authors were from and worked within low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), but 92 percent of the articles addressed interventions in these countries (Lyer, 2018). The unequal distribution of resources and persistent structural barriers to research capacity in the Global South undermines the ability of researchers in LMICs to generate scientific knowledge to address both international and local concerns (Bowsher, et al., 2019) and puts at a disadvantage the researchers in LMICs who are at the forefront of global health practice (Charani, et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the lack of LMIC-based researchers in turn can contribute to a lower quality evidence base because the research lacks local and diverse perspectives and insights.

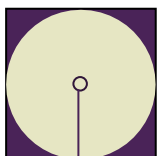


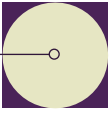
Photo credit: ORCD team

Issuing small grants to local organizations and universities to conduct their own research studies, coupled with customized technical assistance, provides a valuable opportunity for local professionals to gain hands-on research and project management experience. The small grants model can be an effective approach to local capacity strengthening and provides financial support for FP research that is centered in LMICs. As stated in USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening Policy, "Partnering with local actors to strengthen their capacities is one of the most effective ways to advance sustainable development" (2022). This approach contributes to sustainable development by working with host-country institutions to generate FP evidence, disseminate findings to local stakeholders, and help develop strategies for improvements.

D4I Small Grants Program

The Data for Impact (D4I) small grants program was designed to build off the successes and lessons learned from the PRH Associate Award (AA), MEASURE Evaluation Phase IV, and Tanzania AA small grants programs, which generated over 50 small grants research projects combined. (The MEASURE Evaluation and Tanzania AA small grants research papers may be found [here](#).)





D4I awarded small grants to universities and nongovernmental organizations in USAID PRH-priority countries to conduct FP-focused research projects. The research topics were developed by the subgrantee applicants based on local information needs. The overall goal of the program was to address FP information gaps at the subnational, national, or regional level and strengthen the research capacity of local researchers.

The three primary objectives of the program were:

- 1) To build and strengthen research capacity among local agencies.
- 2) To address research gaps in FP to inform policy and programmatic decision making.
- 3) To increase use of research findings by providing an opportunity for the data to be disseminated to and used by local stakeholders and decision makers.

D4I issued a request for applications in May 2020 and received 147 applications from 20 of USAID's 23 PRH priority countries. In February 2021, four applicants were awarded subgrants and initiated their one-year research projects soon after. Each subaward averaged just over \$12,000. This excluded the technical, managerial, and administrative support provided by D4I.

The D4I small grants program provided the funding and technical assistance to organizations and researchers –some of whom were young, emerging, or from new research partners– to conduct rigorous research, develop a data dissemination plan, and share their research findings and recommendations with the broader FP community. With financial and technical assistance, the small grants program supported both primary and secondary data collection and analysis. Each small grant team, which consisted of three or more researchers, developed a working paper and implemented data use activities, such as a data dissemination workshop, research seminar, journal publication, or stakeholder meeting. The model of capacity strengthening that was employed focused on tailored, consistent integrated support throughout the research projects. The various ways the program strengthened local research capacity are explained in the following sections.

Table 1: D4I subgrantees

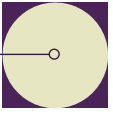
Subgrantee	Country	Research Title
Central Institute of Science and Technology (CiST)	Nepal	Appraisal of FP Commodities Management during the COVID-19 Crisis in Gandaki Province, Nepal
Organization for Research and Community Development (ORCD)	Afghanistan	Analysis of the 2018 Afghanistan Household Survey: Understanding Regional Variations in FP Use
University of Rajshahi, Department of Population Science and Human Resource Development	Bangladesh	Assessing the readiness of health facilities to provide FP services in low-resource settings: Insights from nationally representative Service Provision Assessment Surveys in 10 countries
University of Nigeria, College of Medicine, Health Policy Research Group (HPRG)	Nigeria	Identifying innovative approaches to increase domestic resource mobilization and financing contributions for FP in Nigeria

Providing Firsthand Research Experience

This funding opportunity allowed research knowledge and skills to be put into practice. In LMICs, the need for and motivation to conduct research studies is abundant, but the money is scarce. Providing a relatively modest amount of funding and technical assistance made local implementation of research studies possible and was also a source of pride, as described by Manizha Faqir, the principal investigator (PI) from ORCD:

“This was the first project managed entirely by local people. They were used to always working with foreigners, but since I am Afghan, and was the only PI to work with them on a project, it was quite a relief to them, and they learned quite a lot. Even though the funding wasn’t huge, they felt very honored to say that the entire team was Afghan and that they could manage the project themselves.”

The small grants enabled the research team members to be involved in every stage of research including



applying for a grant, developing a full research proposal, seeking ethical review, gathering stakeholder buy-in, developing data collection tools, conducting data collection, performing data analysis, writing a research manuscript, and presenting and reporting research findings, all with D4I's continuous support. This was an informative and empowering experience for the subgrantees, as expressed by Mohammad Rahman, the PI from the University of Rajshahi:

"From proposal to findings, we received a lot of guidance and learned a lot... My experience with them was very nice."

Through direct technical assistance, many of the subgrantees commented specifically on how much their writing skills improved. Most of them had never received detailed feedback on their writing, nor had they ever received support from professional editors who copyedited their work to international standards. Chinyere Mbachu, the PI from HPRG, commented:

"For me, this is actually the first project where I think I benefited a lot from the review of our working paper. It was so in-depth, and the reviewers didn't just point out or highlight areas that needed to be improved, they also gave us some guidance or direction, you know, that kind of thing, like giving us suggestions, like literature or how to do it. I believe it really helped me and my team in writing the report."

Mentoring for Future Research

Being selected as a D4I small grants recipient prepared the research teams for future research in several ways. First, the grants gave researchers experience and credentials to lead future studies.

Second, by including junior staff on the research teams, the small grants supported country-led efforts to strengthen research capacity. This was especially evident at universities, where the PIs included graduate students on the research teams. A research assistant (RA) from

HPRG talked about how this experience built up her resume:

"I learned a lot as an RA. Initially, I hadn't experienced any research that worked on document review, budget extraction, data analysis, and presentation. But through the project and the help of experts, I was able to extract data from other financial documents and was taught how to create or design templates. I also learned how to extract data from those documents and trainings for our team and how to analyze and present the data that was extracted." – Ifunanya Agu

Third, the small grants allowed the researchers and their organizations to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their research skills to prepare them for future research and funding opportunities.

Building Confidence to Conduct Research

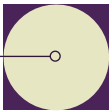
Not only were the small grants highly competitive, but the subgrantees were held accountable to the funding conditions of the subgrant and were held to high research standards, which resulted in high-quality research papers. Once the research projects were successfully completed, some of the researchers reflected on how their experience with successfully completing a research project and meeting the small grants reporting requirements built their individual confidence, and that of their organization, to undertake research studies.

The Afghan team was in the middle of their research project when the Afghan government fell to the Taliban. Despite extremely challenging conditions, the team managed to complete their research project with D4I and USAID's support, which gave them a boost to their confidence:

"Working with D4I affected positively how I managed the project. Maybe it was due to the situation in Afghanistan, because it wasn't a normal situation, we went through A LOT of challenges. D4I, with all their support and opportunity, were very flexible and understanding. They taught us that working effectively as a team – all of us were basically remote, after the crisis – we learned about the importance of communicating with each other at



Chinyere Mbachu, HPRG



the time... This experience changed how I manage projects and with us actually completing this project, it made me believe I can handle any project under a complex situation.” – Manizha Faqir, ORCD

Leading the Research Experience

USAID’s Local Capacity Strengthening Policy emphasizes the need to recognize local insight and expertise and shift the paradigm from partnering *for* to partnering *with*. This philosophy was a cornerstone of the small grants program, which prioritized mutual respect and reciprocity. Rather than following D4I mandates, the small grant applicants themselves proposed the research topics, research methods, and plans for disseminating the research findings.

The technical assistance provided to the subgrantees recognized their existing knowledge, skills, and experience. The PI from ORCD described it as follows:

“They didn’t treat us like we were a contractor or something; they treated us like we were a team... They were coaching us and providing input and feedback as mentors, but it didn’t feel like someone was trying to dictate what to do or teach you; it was in a very smooth and professional and supportive way. And it wasn’t just me, it was other ORCD staff that noticed that too.” – Manizha Faqir

Supporting Plans to Engage Stakeholders and Disseminate Research Findings

A key aspect of the research projects was engaging stakeholders before, during, and after the research was conducted. The co-PI from CiST shared how cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination was a positive experience for them:

“Throughout this process we had to coordinate with the government sector, and this was a beautiful experience, to get exposed to the government sector, because it’s like academic and government are totally different. So this opportunity could link us to the government sector people and also increase our social network with them so that future projects could be easier because we had already had rapport built with government professionals, so this was a good opportunity.” – Isha Karmacharya



Manizha Faqir, ORCD

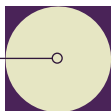
Subgrantee applicants were required to submit a well-thought-out dissemination plan and funded subgrantees had to report on how their research findings were disseminated. For some of the subgrantees who had not done this before, it was a valuable exercise in formulating –even before the research project started– ideas about who the key audiences were for the research findings and what information they needed to know to make informed decisions. The dissemination plans also helped the subgrantees think through how their findings could be shared beyond the traditional format of a report. This was designed to help strengthen participants’ capacity to translate facts and findings into action-oriented recommendations and advocacy information.

Chinyere Mbachu shared an experience with a professor in health economics who was invited to attend a workshop on fiscal space with bureaucrats from Nigeria’s Federal Ministry of Health. He remembered HPRG’s working paper on domestic resources mobilization for FP in Ebonyi State. “That was all he used”, Chinyere said. “He presented the paper as a case study and got them talking about the recommendations that were made for FP funding. So, the material was being used even at the national level. He presented the whole working paper –looking at the results, the recommendations, and what lessons we can learn.”

Executing the dissemination plan and engaging stakeholders also strengthened other skills such as presenting, responding to journal reviewers’ comments, and networking.

Advancing Subgrantees’ Goals to Establish a Presence in the Research Sphere

The effects of the small grants experience extended beyond latent capacity strengthening to improved performance. The research projects strengthened subgrantees’ research portfolios and reputations as competent research organizations. As the co-PI from CiST put it:



“This is just the opening for us... Receiving a small grant demonstrated our organization's credibility and ability to successfully manage funds. This makes it easier for our organization to secure additional grants in the future, and we have been receiving funding from government and other organization.” – Santosh Khadka

Through stakeholder engagement, data collection, and dissemination of findings, the small grants program provided organizations with the opportunity to network with other organizations, technical working groups, and potential donors. These connections helped advance the success of both the individual researchers and their organizations. Again, Santosh Khadka shared:

“This small grant also demonstrated our institutional ability to form partnerships with other organizations, which is often a critical factor in securing new grants.”

Conclusion

There is no “silver bullet” or shortcut for strengthening local research capacity. Strengthening research capacity and improving performance in ways

that reflect local priorities requires continuous, in-depth, and intentional effort. It calls for building a relationship with the researcher so that the technical assistance is collaborative and a joint endeavor. Although this is time intensive, it makes a noticeable difference in the quality of the research and final deliverables and can make a lasting impact on the researchers by helping to springboard their careers and advance their organizations.

Locally led research capacity strengthening can also be more sustainable. Issuing small grants provided a means of putting research ideas and theories into practice, creating authentic connections to community and local stakeholder groups, and enhancing the research expertise and reputation of local organizations and universities to manage and lead future research projects.

The small grants model is a viable approach to addressing research gaps, providing hands-on research experience, and fulfilling USAID’s goal of building local capacity to implement and promote evidence-based practices.



Santosh Khadka, CiST

For more information

D4I supports countries to realize the power of data as actionable evidence that can improve programs, policies, and—ultimately—health outcomes. We strengthen the technical and organizational capacity of local partners to collect, analyze, and use data to support sustainable development. For more information, visit

<https://www.data4impactproject.org/>

This publication was produced with the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the terms of the Data for Impact (D4I) associate award 7200AA18LA00008, which is implemented by the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in partnership with Palladium International, LLC; ICF Macro, Inc.; John Snow, Inc.; and Tulane University. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States government. FS-23-618 D4I

