WHY SEXUAL REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH (SRH) AND HIV INTEGRATION MATTERS:

Lessons from Malawi

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Linkages between core HIV and Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH), services in national programmes can generate important public health benefits. This is according to results of a study undertaken in Malawi under the Integra Initiative-a five year research initiative aimed encouraging the integration of SRH and HIV. The findings of the study were presented at a health conference in Nairobi, which brought together researchers, academics and the donor community.

The Integra Initiative showcases the latest development in research, best practices and highlights emerging concepts in the integration of HIV and SRH services. Integra is managed by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), in collaboration with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and Population Council, and is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Presenting findings of the study to the Nairobi conference, the lead Researcher Dr Lawrence Oteba explained that the results established that SRH and HIV was cost efficient and cost effective.

Dr Oteba told the conference that "while the importance of linkages was recognized, the current status of these linkages were not clear". "Determining priorities to shape national policies, remains a challenge, he said. In Malawi for instance, he said, policies supporting SRH and planning were in place but the study identified a number of barriers to effective integration.

"Planning, implementation and monitoring and Evaluation of SRH and HIV were vertical", he said. Shortage of service providers such as clinical officers and nurses and shortages of essential medicines were cited as other examples of some of the barriers that need to be overcome.

The study recommends the use of evidence to inform policy and practice and the need to synergies policies to create an enabling environment for SRH and HIV linkages. Dr Oteba's presentation was one the major activities undertaken by Integra in the past three years. The study was aimed at gaining in depth understanding of the current situation of SRH and HIV linkages at policy, policy systems and service levels in Malawi to determine priorities and shape national plans and frameworks for scaling up and strengthening linkages. It is expected that the findings will the Malawi Government in designing an RH and SRH policy, a process which is currently underway.

The initiative comes against a background of concerns that Malawi may not meet some of its health targets in the Health Millennium Development Goals. A 2010 Report on the MDGs, issues by the Malawi Government notes that " While the country will likely meet its targets in improve child survival and reduce the spread of malaria, HIV and TB, its targets for improving maternal health are off course". The report adds, "*Although Malawi has made progress in a number of areas in the health sector, the gains are delicate and challenges will persist until Malawi addresses its population growth and reduces its burden of diseases*".

Key recommendations are that the Government should "Mainstream reproductive health and family planning into public health and sanitation programmes and to "Include access to reproductive health and family planning and other social services in poverty reduction strategies.

The Integra initiative began in 2008 to try to better document, understand and evaluate the benefits, challenges and opportunities of different models of integration SRH and HIV services. Integra is a five-year research project (2008–2012) that aims at gathering evidence to determine the costs and benefits of using different models for delivering integrated HIV and sexual and reproductive health services in high and medium HIV prevalence settings, to reduce HIV infection (and associated stigma) and unintended pregnancy.