

Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition annual meeting, 7 – 11 October 2013

Speech given by Manty Tarawalli, Director of Programme Development and Quality Marie Stopes Sierra Leone

The country

Sierra Leone has a population of six million people, with a Contraceptive Prevalence Rate of approximately 8%.

The country is poor despite its rich resource base. Approximately 50% of all Family Planning services are delivered through Peripheral Health Units (PHUs), district, regional and national hospitals. With 12 mobile outreach teams, 8 static centres and 30 social franchisees, Marie Stopes SL is the second largest provider, delivering 41% of services.

The country has an unmet need of 48% and abortion services are restricted by Law. Teenage pregnancy at the rate of 34% is alarmingly high and is on the increase.

By a way of addressing these issues, H.E. the President of Sierra Leone, Dr. Ernest Bai Koroma has ensured that Family Planning is a flagship project under Sierra Leone's national development agenda – *'The Agenda for Prosperity'*.

Similarly, Family Planning is part of the package of services contained in the Free Healthcare Initiative.

Moreover, it is perceived as the underlying determinant that will sustain the Free Healthcare Initiative. But more importantly, it is the foundation that underpins the recently launched Teenage Pregnancy Strategy – *'Let girls be girls and not mothers'*.

Yet, regardless of its recognizable importance, access to contraceptive commodities was often severely delayed by clearance processes at Sierra Leone's Ports.

These lengthy procedures have cost the health system millions of Leones in staff time, provision of free post abortion care services for women who have undergone unsafe abortions and erosion of Family Planning Commodity funding for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO).

The challenge

The National Tax Policy prohibits taxes on some pharmaceutical commodities like Malaria, HIV/AIDS, and Tuberculosis drugs but the policy does not extend to Family Planning Commodities.

For those non-taxable commodities, it means immediate clearance and therefore no demurrage costs. The principal importers of Family Planning commodities in Sierra Leone are UNFPA and other Non-Governmental Organizations.

It is UNFPA that upholds the supply-side for Government service delivery while also providing excellent levels of support to all FP service delivery NGOs.

So although NGOs like UNFPA and Marie Stopes enjoy a general duty-free status, bestowed to them by the Government of Sierra Leone due to their varying national social contributions; this benefit is only granted on application when required.

So when it comes to clearance of Family Planning commodities, NGOs usually have to incur heavy demurrage charges to private shipping companies due to the cumbersome duty free application process.

So in effect, it erodes the intention behind the duty-free concession.

For example in 2012, the demurrage costs for FP from three NGOs amounted to **\$135,000 (Furthermore, MSSL had a shipment of 200,000 Pregnancy Test Kits that it could not clear and so, was left to expire at the Ports)**

NGO	2012
UNFPA	\$100,000
PPASL (IPPF)	\$10,000
Marie Stopes SL	\$25,000
Total	\$135,000 (17,000 implants)

So what was the clearance process for FP commodities?

The process included seven tedious steps (with or without a Clearing Agent):

1. NGO receives the Bill of Lading and Airway Bill
2. NGO writes a Letter to the NGO Liaison Officer at the Ministry of Health requesting Duty Free with supporting documentation
3. Following validation, the request is then granted by Minister
4. Approval to release the commodities from the Ports is also sought by the NGO from the Pharmacy Board
5. Pharmacy Board following its own validation provides its authorisation to release the commodities from the Ports (commodity registration, pharmacovigilance, efficacy)

6. On approval by the Ministry of Health & Pharmacy Board, the Ministry of Finance is then required to make the final endorsement
7. Thereafter Custom Clearance

This process can sometimes take up to six months to obtain the final endorsement from the Ministry of Finance. And demurrage charges commence after 6 days of goods arriving. The demurrage costs are unregulated and therefore inconsistent in its levy.

The theory of change approach

Marie Stopes Sierra Leone approached the Innovation Fund to establish a policy review committee to address this unnecessary restriction. Built around the Pathway of Change, our interventions were a set of blocks that represented the change process.

Key to the process was the development of an effective Partnership (*it was Helen Keller who said; alone we can do so little, together we can do so much*):

The committee was a strategic powerful team consisting of the Parliamentary Health Committee Lead, Health Civil Society, UNFPA, IPPF, Ministry of Health and the National Revenue Authority.

Furthermore, having identified the assumptions; particularly that of clearing agent inefficiency and incompetence we contracted a health civil society organisation to conduct a Strategic Assessment. This laid bare the current situation including the financial losses and the real impact to both NGOs and the country herself.

Still working on assumptions and this time on private sector profiteering, an advocacy trip was planned. Following the dissemination of the Strategic Assessment report, an advocacy trip to Senegal where duty is removed from FP commodities was conducted with the National Revenue Authority.

The purpose of the trip was to reveal options and assess impact. (That's where we discovered an additional option to the ones we had already outlined.....)

A trip report was developed by the National Revenue Authority which unpacked some of the assumptions and made key recommendations.

Thereafter, we assiduously carried out a series of one-to-one meetings with senior officials at the National Revenue Authority and the Ministry of Finance.

So what has changed?

From now on, every NGO importing Family Planning commodity; and this includes UNFPA will no longer incur demurrage costs.

A new policy has been created by the National Revenue Authority to circumvent the previous tedious and cumbersome processes.

A Duty Waiver permit will be issued by the National Revenue Authority on application, prior to clearance. This means the NGO can clear the commodities the same day the shipment arrives and sidestep the normal processes.

The cost savings made by NGOs through this permit would certainly boost the country's overall Family Planning Commodity budget.

And in addition, reduce the levels of commodity stock-outs which undeniably would increase access and reduce the 48% unmet need.

And furthermore, it would contribute to the reduction of teenage pregnancies and encourage an increase in the country's Contraceptive Prevalence Rate (CPR).

And off course once the CPR is increased, the maternal mortality will begin to reduce, literacy levels will start to improve and so on....

Key lessons

For me it's all about Evidence & Relationships (to obtain the evidence you require the technical expertise & funding support and to leverage on the relationships you need the connections and a good understanding of the politics).

The theory of change is a useful tool. It helps to describe the process of planned social change – from the assumptions that guide the design to the long term goal it seeks to achieve. And by doing that, it helps each partner define its individual role in achieving the agreed goals.

Be mindful of the Policy Environment (Political Will) – In Sierra Leone: The Agenda for Prosperity gives an insight into the heart (interest) of the government. (With that base we just have to monitor activities to see whether there happens to be a shift in priorities?)

Stay focused and attentive to spot the Entry Point – When the Window of Opportunity presents, you need to be ready... (so be Flexible and ready to amend your implementation plan to meet available opportunities (teenage pregnancy strategy)

And finally, Tireless Lobbying (**diligently pushing the evidence through strong established contacts is without fail paramount**)