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# Innovating for Maternal and Child Health in Africa teams share early findings in Dakar

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As the seven-year Innovating for Maternal and Child Health in Africa (IMCHA) program reached its halfway mark, 80 African and Canadian experts gathered in Dakar, Senegal, from April 24-27, 2017 to discuss the program's emerging findings and to hone their research and policy engagement skills.

Distinguished representatives of the Government of Senegal and the Canadian Embassy in Senegal welcomed participants and reiterated the high priority they place on improving maternal and child health and ending the unnecessary deaths of women and children in Africa.

Members from the 19 IMCHA research teams reported on initial research in the communities where they are testing innovations in maternal and child health. A baseline study in Jimma Zone, Ethiopia, for example, showed that 46% of women still delivered babies at home — far from medical care should complications arise. Kunuz Hajibedru, head of the federal government's Zonal Health Office in Jimma, said that childbirth still occurs at home despite the existence of government maternal waiting areas, which enable pregnant women to live in close proximity to health centres as their due date approaches.

Hajibedru is part of a research team that includes Jimma University and University of Ottawa researchers. Finding ways to improve maternal waiting areas is just one of the innovations the team is studying. Once the research identifies the most effective interventions to attract more women to use the waiting areas, Hajibedru wants to expand the service to the 120 health centres in Jimma's 21 districts, serving 3.2 million people.

Each IMCHA team includes a policymaker like Hajibedru to ensure that the exciting opportunities brought about by innovation are supported through an enabling environment where they can take root. Engaging all relevant stakeholders — health policymakers, administrators, and personnel — at every step of the way is key to ensuring sustainability and scaling-up in the long run.

Knowledge transfer and policy engagement were high on the Dakar meeting's agenda. Researchers and policymakers alike took advantage of the skill building sessions or "knowledge cafes" to learn about reaching out to stakeholders, writing policy briefs, and using social media. Participants discussed quality of care and innovations to maximize the effective use of human resources in the health sector.

Researchers from Tanzania's IMCHA research teams exchange ideas at a group discussion. (Photo credit: Nadia Akseer)

Community health workers are also at the heart of several IMCHA projects. These volunteer health workers can help the healthcare system deliver service to vulnerable populations that are currently outside its reach. Research teams in Senegal and the border area of South Sudan and northern Uganda are exploring how to make the work of these community health workers more sustainable by associating their activity with social enterprise. In Nigeria, for example, researchers are testing a new guide's effectiveness in enabling community midwives to recognize and treat perinatal depression. "We need to address pregnancy-related depression through non-specialized care, because we have one psychiatrist per 1 million people in most of Nigeria," said Bibilola Oladeji, a researcher with the University of Ibadan.

The integration of gender and equity considerations has been at the heart of the IMCHA initiative. Participants at the Dakar meeting discussed the gender and equity dimensions of their research projects. The sessions facilitated joint reflection on designing interventions that are gender-sensitive and assessing the need for research capacity in gender/equity issues. They also emphasized the importance of aligning research to national gender policies and key stakeholders such as relevant ministries.

The Dakar meeting was organized by the West African Health Organization and the African Population Health Research Center. These two organizations play a central role in the IMCHA initiative by complementing the country research teams' efforts to integrate the evidence they generate into national policies and practices in maternal and child health.

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