SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOR CHANGE AND THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR FAMILY PLANNING

MARCH 2023
Breakingthrough RESEARCH is USAID’s flagship social and behavior change (SBC) research and evaluation project to drive the generation, packaging, and use of innovative SBC research to inform programming. A six-year project (2017–2023), Breakingthrough RESEARCH was led by the Population Council in collaboration with our consortium partners: Tulane University, Avenir Health, Population Reference Bureau, Institute for Reproductive Health at Georgetown University, and ideas42. Our approach was to foster collaboration and shared learning, ensure SBC programs are based in ‘what works’, elevate the impact of evidence-based SBC programs, and put evidence into practice. Breakingthrough RESEARCH did this by accessing the evidence, identifying priority research questions, designing and implementing research studies to fill evidence gaps and strengthen programs, and synthesising and packaging evidence for use.

Within the breadth of our research portfolio, Breakingthrough RESEARCH had four main project legacy areas: provider behavior change (PBC); integrated SBC; advancing SBC measurement; and costing and cost-effectiveness of SBC. For each of these legacy areas, Breakingthrough RESEARCH curated a legacy resource highlighting the state-of-the-art evidence and the tools and guidance produced by the project over the past six years to advance evidence-based SBC programming. This legacy resource highlights evidence, insights, and learnings over the past six years from Breakingthrough RESEARCH’s work to advance SBC and the enabling environment for family planning.

This legacy resource is a compilation of selected resources that do not represent a comprehensive, definitive, or inclusive list. It is not representative of the findings or conclusions of the Breakingthrough RESEARCH project, nor is it intended to be a substitute for the literature or research it references. The information presented is intended to be a starting point for those interested in learning more about the evidence for behavior change in the context of family planning and the enabling environment.

Learn about state-of-the-art SBC evidence Breakingthrough RESEARCH has generated
Explore key SBC insights from Breakingthrough RESEARCH
Find calls to action to continue to advance evidence-based SBC measurement

Social and behavior change approaches can best support family planning programs to achieve their goals when the context of the enabling environment is clearly defined and measured, better elucidating the pathways by which behavioral determinants influence health outcomes.
Research and Learning Agenda for Advancing Integrated SBC Programming

Breakthrough RESEARCH developed a Research and Learning Agenda (RLA) for Advancing Integrated SBC Programming to identify cross-cutting SBC knowledge gaps, and key research questions with broad applicability across global, regional, and national levels across health sectors. The goal is to help guide decision making across sectors, bolster collaborative, reduce duplication of efforts, and maximize the impact of research and programmatic interventions. In recent years, there has been a shift away from a vertical programming approach, focusing on one health or development topic, to integrated approaches that tackle multiple health or development issues or outcomes under the same program. Approaches tackling multiple health or development issues or outcomes under the same program have applicability across a range of health areas, including family planning, for strengthened programmatic approaches that include family planning have the potential to reduce duplication, lower costs, avoid missed opportunities, and provide the right services and information to the right clients at the right time. In this RLA, experts identified implementing an enabling environment as a key evidence gap and articulated two primary research and learning questions:

1. What are the conditions (for instance, political and donor support, timing, capacity, coordination with/ by government, and resources for implementation) that enable or hinder design for appropriate and feasible implementation of integrated SBC programming?

2. What are the conditions that enable effective adaptation or reusability of integrated SBC programming?

Lessons generated from research and learning for the above research question include that an enabling environment that encourages girls’ education and social and gender norms. And while many approaches tackling multiple health or development issues or outcomes under the same program have applicability at global, regional, and local levels across health sectors. The goal in developing this RLA was to inform programming as well as inform further research and investment needed to continue implementing in an enabling environment.

Evidence to Inform Integrated SBC in the Sahel

Breakthrough RESEARCH conducted a review of the literature on SBC programming in the Sahel that summarized the evidence to support an evaluation of an overview of SBC programmatic approaches tackling multiple health areas or development sectors in a coordinated and intentional way. Integrated SBC programs aimed to address factors such as knowledge, attitudes, and norms pertaining to family planning planning. While the evidence from this review was designed to inform integrated programming addressing multiple health behaviors, need to determine how information is shared within communities, including which sources of information can most frequently accessed and trusted, and how many figures of influence can be engaged to support adoption of healthy behaviors such as family planning. In the literature, evidence-based ways identified in the review were practiced by women, their family, friends, and community leaders. Evidence on how messages that can address knowledge gaps and dispel myths, promoting a more supportive environment that encourages girls’ education and more supportive environments that summarize the evidence to support an evaluation of integrated SBC programming in the region for family planning. The review provides an overview of SBC programmatic approaches that have addressed behavioral determinants and health outcomes in the region. The review revealed that persistent knowledge gaps, myths, misconceptions, and norms continue to influence health behaviors, including the use of family planning in the region. Addressing these knowledge gaps and starting the myths and misconceptions in the region was designed to inform integrated programming addressing multiple health behaviors, need to determine how information is shared within communities, including which sources of information can most frequently accessed and trusted, and how many figures of influence can be engaged to support adoption of healthy behaviors such as family planning.
Understanding Family Planning Outcomes in Northwest Nigeria

To some, the success of the evidence identified through the BSS, Breakthrough Malaria conducted a series of explorations in northwest Nigeria through 1,010 questionnaires, an integrated behavior and structural surveillance (BSS) approach. The northwest Nigeria is a region with high fertility and fertility components are close in line with high fertility norms, no social support of appropriate age, and cultural practices. Findings from an exploratory questionnaire and literature review showed that family planning is a woman’s responsibility and they have to seek permission from their husbands to use contraceptive methods. A better understanding of these psychosocial factors can help build positive normative perceptions of contraception and improve women’s own approval of family planning, appeared to have the greatest impact on social and behavioral ideations and influences, Breakthrough ACTION/Nigeria’s SBC program also implemented several capacity strengthening efforts. One was Breakthrough ACTION/Nigeria’s SBC program also implemented several capacity strengthening efforts. One was

Influences on Family Planning Outcomes

An enabling environment is needed and how SBC approaches can facilitate and support the health ecosystem in general, and structures to increase community self-efficacy, coordinate and support the health care workforce. This could hamper the sustainability of community engagement in SBC approaches. Breakthrough ACTION/Nigeria’s SBC program also implemented several capacity strengthening efforts. One was Breakthrough ACTION/Nigeria’s SBC program also implemented several capacity strengthening efforts. One was

Exploring the Intersection of Individual, Community, and Institutional Influences in Northwest Nigeria

To complement the fifth evaluation of individual and behavioral influences and behaviors, Breakthrough ACTION/Nigeria developed a set of qualitative studies aimed to identify and understand how SBC programming can increase awareness and help to build positive social influence. Breakthrough ACTION/Nigeria’s SBC program also implemented several capacity strengthening efforts. One was
SBC approaches that address barriers that can result in differential exposure to SBC activities can employ more effective and inclusive engagement strategies to foster empowered family planning decision-making for women, couples, and youth.

Understanding and Overcoming Barriers to Targeting Audiences

Understanding which channels to use to reach target audiences and how to leverage these channels requires an understanding of the strategies that families use to make decisions about family planning. This chapter will highlight several key findings of a study Breakthrough RESEARCH conducted in both Niger and Nigeria to understand how media such as television, radio, and social media can be used to guide SBC campaigns in support of family planning.

In Niger, the SBC campaign, Offspring, utilized media such as television, radio, and social media to provide information about SBC and the enabling environment. For some men in locations where the husbands’ schools (for men) and peer group activities with health workers and cultural and religious leaders (e.g., religious or traditional leaders) were more effective in reaching the intended audience.

Understanding and Overcoming Barriers to Reaching Target Audiences

Engaging SBC approaches that address barriers that can result in differential exposure to SBC activities can employ more effective and inclusive engagement strategies to foster empowered family planning decision-making for women, couples, and youth.

Amongst adolescents as among older women. The major-

Husbands appear to be as important for health decisions

significantly between adolescents and older women.

A second

an important consideration where survey question -

indicators. When using these approaches, there must

intermediate determinants that can take time to change,

Yet, to fully understand their impact, particularly on population health, investments

support for investments into long-term evaluations are

requiring continuous attention in order to build and

for these efforts, particularly after donor funding ends.

that allow for the continuation of successful SBC as well as build and susta

is vital.

and sustain positive change.

Continued and strength -

The investment case for family plan-

reproductive health can be more intentional. Investments should pay equal attention to SBC and demand generation, service delivery, commodity logistics and supply, capacity building, and the enabling environ-

—Feyi-Oyekan Adegbake

USAID Nigeria

The enabling environment is not monolithic and requires

Domestic public financing is a key High Impact Practice

USAID Nigeria


7High Impact Practices in Family Planning. 2015. “Maximizing demand generation: making family planning information and services”

and “Galvanizing commitment” provide tips from imple -

influences on different health outcomes. The effects of family planning involve multiple levels of influence, including individual level, is thought to be an important factor associated with intra- 

for agency special communication post-decision-

and other cross-cutting domains of health behav-

The Index is a composite index designed to

empowerment in relation to specific health outcomes or

individual level, is thought to be an important factor asso-

social accountability”.

And finally, as the focus on integration continues to grow,

design and coordination of SBC approaches in family planning pro-

Stakeholders, including communities, need to be engaged in the

also be mechanisms in place for communities to hold

targeted messages of change, and the use of evaluation of SBC approaches in family planning programs is still a

the evidence base for how SBC can best support family

The investment case for family planning programs. Over the past six years, Breakthrough RESEARCH has generated a body of evidence to advance the evidence base for how SBC can best support family planning, and researchers should consider using the high impact messages, tools, and indicators identified for this purpose as part of SBC planning process and information.”

infection, and “Maximizing demand generation: making family planning information and services”

are important determinants of family planning behavior.

Thus far, the focus on integration has continued to grow,

continued and strengthen

and the enabling environment for one behavior influences

commonly understood of the similarities and the differences

and negative unintended consequences of integration, 

Next, the focus on integration remains relevant.

Demand generation, service delivery, commodity logistics and supply, capacity building, and the enabling environ-

CAPS, USAID Nigeria

and “Maximizing demand generation: making family planning information and services”.

and researchers should consider using the high impact messages, tools, and indicators identified for this purpose as part of SBC planning process and information.”

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evaluation of SBC approaches in family planning programs

and behaviors of female adolescents by examining ado-

and treatment of childhood illnesses. More than half of

spanning such practices as the use of ANC, postpartum

and researchers should consider using the High Impact

ously observed, female adolescents who were

Female adolescents who were

functioning using the avail-

involves multiple levels of influence, including individual level, is thought to be an important factor associated with intra-

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The Population Council confronts critical health and development issues—from stopping the spread of HIV to improving reproductive health and ensuring that young people lead full and productive lives. Through biomedical, social science and public health research in more than 50 countries, the Council works with our partners to deliver solutions that lead to more effective policies, programs, and technologies to improve lives worldwide. Established in 1952 and headquartered in New York, the Council is a nongovernmental, nonprofit organization with an international board of trustees.

Breakthrough RESEARCH catalyzes social and behavior change by conducting state-of-the-art research and evaluation and promoting evidence-based solutions to improve health and development programs around the world. Breakthrough RESEARCH is a consortium led by the Population Council in partnership with Avenir Health, ideas42, Institute for Reproductive Health at Georgetown University, Population Reference Bureau, and Tulane University.