UPDATE ON THE INDEPTH NETWORK MATERNAL AND NEWBORN WORKING GROUP

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The INDEPTH Network Maternal and Newborn Working Group (MNWG) was set up to support multi-site, multi-country generation of evidence to inform policy and programmes, specifically focusing on maternal and newborn health and survival in low income countries. Its technical secretariat is hosted by the School of Public Health, Makerere University, Uganda. Currently, there are **33 Health and Demographic Surveillance Sites (HDSS)** forming the MNWG.

The MNWG has conducted key activities, including the following:

- It developed a draft tool kit meant to standardise and improve longitudinal maternal and newborn data collection in 2014
- Participated in international maternal and newborn initiatives, for instance the ENAP writing and measurement working groups, the USAID maternal mortality mapping meetings, and others
- Published a supplement in the Global Health Action Journal from the Uganda Newborn Study (UNEST) in 2016
- Held a data improvement and tools development workshop in Kampala, Uganda in July 2015, with 18 sites from Africa and Asia that are among countries supported by Save the Children. This meeting also led to the development of the Every Newborn Action Plan (ENAP) metrics proposal that was submitted to the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) for funding
- Obtained funding from CIFF through London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), in which 5 HDSS sites (Bandim in Guinea Bissau, Dabat in Ethiopia, Iganga-Mayuge in Uganda, Kintampo in Ghana and Matlab in Bangladesh) will conduct global impact research on measurement of pregnancies, still births, newborn deaths, gestational age, and birth weight
- Held the ENAP metrics design and protocol development workshop in Kampala, Uganda in June 2016 with the 5 HDSS sites, LSHTM, CIFF and representatives from the INDEPTH secretariat/Makerere University School of Public Health.
This group developed a strategic plan. Its **VISION** is to be a platform for high quality standardized measurement for maternal and newborn health and survival across countries, which is used to influence decision making, inform policies, implement programs, and monitor and evaluate innovative solutions in low and middle income countries.

To pursue such a vision, the MNWG has set itself a **MISSION** to strengthen the capacity of INDEPTH member HDSSs to generate and disseminate high quality maternal and newborn health data and innovative research in order to inform national and global strategies for maternal and newborn care in low and middle income countries.

**CURRENT AND FUTURE ACTIVITIES**

*Completion of the strategic plan for 2017-2020*

The MNWG embarked on the process of developing its strategic plan for the period 2017-2020, which will be completed by the end of 2016. The proposed strategic objectives are:

- To improve multi-country, multi-site measurement of key events around the time of pregnancy, birth and early childhood, including tracking the scale up of programs, in at least 60% of INDEPTH network sites
- To provide a platform for testing and validating new population level indicators for events around the time of pregnancy, birth and early childhood, in at least 60% of INDEPTH network sites
- To provide a platform for developing new innovations or testing old ones in the local context in order to improve quality of care for maternal and newborn care, in at least 60% of INDEPTH network sites
- To contribute to building and / or strengthening capacity for research and program (design and management/ leadership) expertise in maternal and newborn health, in at least 60% of INDEPTH network sites in low and middle income countries
- To promote translation of maternal and newborn health research findings into policy, leading to policy change and effective coverage at national and international scale, by working with at least 60% of INDEPTH network sites

At a recent INDEPTH Network Strategic Planning Workshop it was recommended that the working group adjust its name to include **child health**, which is going to be done in the new strategic plan.

*ENAP metrics work*

The MNWG, together with LSHTM, were awarded a grant from CIFF to conduct research focusing on three primary objectives:

- To improve household survey capture of stillbirths and neonatal deaths by assessing whether the “pregnancy history” approach produces considerably better estimates of pregnancy outcomes than the “DHS-7 birth history” approach
- To improve household survey capture of birth weight and gestational age by assessing various methods for measuring these outcomes in surveys
To optimise HDSS data capture of pregnancy outcomes (stillbirths, neonatal deaths, birth weight and gestational age) to link and compare with survey data to examine who is missing and why

The five HDSS sites selected are already making enhancements to some of the methods they use regularly and will begin data collection in 2017, followed by an end line survey to validate the ENAP metrics work.

**Standardization of data collection**

The HDSSs play a major role in providing data and information that is important nationally and globally. However, data on certain key indicators may not be collected by some HDSSs, leading to gaps in information. The MNWG intends to standardize data collection in its areas of interest by working with the centres to document and harmonize discrepancies in definitions and measurement of key maternal, newborn and child indicators; ensuring standardized measurement of these indicators across all sites; and producing standardized tools and methodologies that will be tested and scaled up for measurement of pregnancies and pregnancy outcomes. In addition, the group intends to develop meta-data with standardized variables and definitions for maternal and newborn health outcomes and verbal and social autopsy.

**Compiling rates from MNWG sites**

One of the key requirements from the MNWG is to compile rates from different indicators annually across the sites and make these publically available. The group is in the process of developing a template to collect information from the member sites, as well as a database to be used for housing the data. The data will remain the property of each participating centre and data sharing agreements will be signed beforehand, consistent with INDEPTH Network operations.

**Writing joint papers**

There are many opportunities for multi-site analyses and generation of papers on different aspects of maternal, newborn and child health. This is already underway, but a lot of potential topics remain unexplored. The MNWG encourages member centres to take the initiative and lead in identifying areas for collaboration and writing with other sites. Authorship agreements will be in place to ensure transparent and fair authorship of articles.

**Joint application for grants**

Member centres will work together to develop and submit proposals for additional funding to support the HDSSs and working group activities. Plans for the first joint, cross-site grant application are already underway within the ENAP metrics work.

**Capacity strengthening**

This is to be done within and across centres, for instance through provision of PhD opportunities and support, as well as hosting interns, students and researchers at HDSSs and giving them the opportunity to access and utilize the data.

**Regular communication with member sites**

The MNWG is embarking on regular engagement and communication with member centres, in a variety of ways. This will include online discussions on topics of interest, as well as sharing information on current affairs, research and grants in the areas of maternal, newborn and child health research.
Engage national and global communities

It is crucial that the work being done by the different HDSSs and the overall MNWG is constantly shared with policy makers, researchers, and those providing health care in different facilities. This will not only publicize important findings and challenges, but open up discussions and interactions among different stakeholders in the public and private sectors. The MNWG and member centres will make greater efforts to produce and disseminate data through research and policy briefs, writing of reports and the use of other fora.

Collaboration with global partners

The MNWG is working on establishment of partnerships and collaborations within the global health arena. For instance, the group recently held discussions with a team from Global Alignment for Immunization Safety Assessment (GAIA) that are interested in surveillance for maternal immunization. A protocol to conduct a pilot study within the Iganga-Mayuge HDSS in Uganda as part of this initiative is under development.

Increasing the number of member sites

All member HDSSs of the INDEPTH network are potentially members of the MNWG, since they collect data on pregnancy and pregnancy outcomes. The group aims to grow the number of HDSSs in the MNWG in order to have a bigger pool of data, expertise and networks to work with and build on.

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