



Gates gives \$25 million to expand Hopkins research project

By: Daniel Leaderman Daily Record Business Writer November 9, 2015

A Johns Hopkins University-led research effort is training women in nine countries in Africa and Asia to use smartphones to collect national survey data about their family planning needs.

Now, a \$25 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will help expand the project, which aims to get useful data to policymakers much faster than traditional methods, according to the university's Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Typical paper-and-pencil surveys provide data at five- to ten-year intervals, meaning the organizations that depend on that information can spend years waiting for data that's already outdated before they get it, said Selamawit Desta, program officer with the Performance Monitoring and Accountability 2020 (PMA2020) project.

But by using smartphones to collect the data, which is promptly uploaded to the cloud, the project can generate information to shape policy decisions much more quickly, Desta said.

"If you were running a business, why would you wait five to 10 years to know how you're doing?" Desta said. "That's what sparked the work we do."

Data collected by the project is tracking the progress of a global initiative called Family Planning 2020 — whose backers include the Gates Foundation and the United Nations Population Fund — which aims to give 120 million more women and girls access to contraceptives by 2020.

PMA2020 launched in 2013 with an initial, \$15 million grant from the foundation. So far, it has conducted surveys in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Indonesia, Uganda, Niger and the Democratic Republic of the Congo; the program will expand into India and Pakistan in 2016.

In each country, data is collected every six months for the first two years, and once per year from then on.

The program is now halfway through its five-year performance period, Project Director Scott Radloff said in a statement. "Our focus for the first phases of PMA2020 has been on building the platform in new countries," he said. "The focus in the coming years will be on strengthening the platform, introducing efficiencies and building sustainability."

In addition to collecting data about the reproductive health and family planning needs of women in these countries, the program recruits and trains women from the communities being targeted to conduct the surveys, Desta said.

These women are better-informed about local languages and cultures than outside researchers would be, and they have a built-in level of trust among the people they're surveying, she said. The project also empowers women by providing them with a job and a way to foster change in their communities, Desta said.

In each country, the project works with a local partner to implement the surveys, such as Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia and Makerere University in Uganda, according to the Bloomberg School.

Data collected by the project shows increases in the percentage of women using long-acting or permanent methods of birth control in Ethiopia, Kenya and Indonesia in the past several years, according to the school.

Survey data also has helped the governments in Ghana and Uganda set long-term goals for their family planning policies, according to the school.