A360/RISE PROGRAM PROVIDES TECHNICAL SUPPORT TO THE ETHIOPIAN MINISTRY OF HEALTH TO SUPPORT RURAL YOUNG GIRLS AND THEIR PARTNERS TO PLAN FOR THEIR FAMILIES AND PURSUE THEIR LIFE GOALS.
CONTEXT

In 2020, four in five girls in Ethiopia were giving birth by age 20. Research has shown that young mothers are less likely to complete an education and more likely to face poverty throughout the course of their lifetime. This is particularly true for young people in rural environments who are less likely to be aware of family planning resources or have access to contraceptive methods.

With generous support from the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), Population Services International provides technical support to the Ethiopian Ministry of Health on the RISE (Roadmap to Integrating Smart Start in Ethiopia) Project. RISE aims to provide young couples in rural areas with an understanding of how delayed first birth and spaced pregnancies facilitate improved savings and capacity to pursue their shared life goals.

APPROACH

Initiated in 2020, the RISE Project builds on the successes of the A360 Project’s Smart Start approach, to target married, adolescent girls and couples aged 15-19 in rural Ethiopia. The Smart Start tool takes the form of a physical booklet and an interactive video that explains the financial and social implications of having children and offers useful saving techniques to help avoid financial difficulties. Using clear and simple language and visuals, the Smart Start tool helps adolescents visualize what the future could be like having children at different stages, and with or without the necessary resources to support them.

The initiative is unique in its approach, utilizing an all-women volunteer group called the Women Development Army who – equipped with PSI training and experience themselves using Smart Start – serve as role models and educational figures to increase access to information on contraceptive use. These women extend health information to the more remote and hard-to-reach communities where they reside. Those young couples who are interested in services – more than 50% – are then referred to government-employed Health Extension Workers who work at rural health facilities serving their area for personalized family planning counseling and services.

“We trace defaulters and support follow up of the girls, even remind her of her appointment and method-taking date. We are the link between the service and the user.”

— Workinesh Mandabo (25), Ayelech Bejige (30), Meselech Aklilu (25) and Belaynesh Muse (22) - mothers, users of Smart Start, and members of the Women Development Army in Diguna Fango Woreda
As of 2022, 26,000 Health Extension Workers received Smart Start training and then were redeployed to rural areas to start mobilizing and counseling young girls and their partners on the importance of using contraceptive services to achieve couple’s life goals. The government’s support, commitment and investment has been critical in solidifying the availability of family planning services in remote areas and reaching adolescents, an age group previously overlooked in healthcare interventions.

“After we got married, we came to the [health post] for counseling. They included Smart Start in this program. Besides the family planning service, they taught us the importance of financial stability and how to manage our finances... I was happy when I realized I can be happy with my wife and still complete school.”

— Husband and university student Temesgen Teshome (19)

“After getting Smart Start, [my husband and I] saved our money and constructed our own house there in the town. After graduating, we plan to have a child. We also have plans to renovate our house.”

— Wife and university student Mihiret Paulos (17)

IMPACT

As of December 2022, the RISE Project reached 157,192 married adolescents like Magnus in rural Ethiopia with newfound opportunities, all having adopted contraceptive methods of their choice after receiving Smart Start counseling. This interest, and acceptance, is sparking a change in young people.

Adolescent husbands are also enthusiastic about family planning methods. We’ve found that emphasizing the financial implications of having children and the benefits of saving in preparation are often the most convincing aspects of family planning, and this speaks directly to young men, who are most often responsible for the finances of the family. Their support, influenced by positive experiences of their peers spread by word of mouth, is important in reaching couples, as men often have the final say in family decision-making.

Personalized family planning and contraceptive methods are gaining traction because young couples are convinced by the benefits of using contraceptives and are sharing their positive experiences with their peers, creating an influential word-of-mouth loop.
CHALLENGES

Health services are sought after, appreciated and valued – but under-served. The project has encountered difficulties.

Community members still expect to receive rewards for participating in meetings and activities, as they experienced from international organizations previously leading family planning initiatives. Political leadership may create problems for Health Extension Workers to serve their community – interpreting health services as a divisive political activity, not as an effort that benefits all society.

Health posts are not equipped with enough trained professionals to provide family planning services. Health posts are often in poor condition, have no electricity or running water and frequently run out of family planning commodities and essential medicines. We find champions for family planning everywhere in rural Ethiopia, but in practice people are often turned away when the technical capacity within health posts is lacking.

Additional resources and support are greatly needed to improve the quality of services and training, and ensure there is a consistent supply of medicines and family planning commodities.

“Previously, when family planning service coverage was very low, there were many husbands that refused it but these days when people use it and have knowledge about the service, and men are responding positively.

— Marta Amthys (33), Aster Dansa (35), and Tamenech Doda (34), Health Extension Workers using Smart Start

I was previously working in different regions and the same problem kept happening. People are coming to get [family planning] services but there are not enough trained health professionals. This is the greatest challenge we face.

— Maternal and Neonatal Child Health Coordinator for Dugna Fango Woreda
OUTLOOK

When first implementing RISE, government health officers encountered resistance immediately – from community elders, religious leaders and generally among the community. Project leads changed this mindset by speaking with influential figures and addressing their concerns. Now, it is common to hear family planning values being endorsed by teachers in schools, religious leaders during church service, government officials serving their community and casually among friends.

“We often counsel our friends to be like us and most of them have accepted this program after getting this information from us. We encourage them to use family planning so that they can have a comfortable life and confident relationship with their partner...”

— University students and married couple Merhelot (17) and Tuscho (19)

CONCLUSION

With the government’s support, the project intends to expand its services nationwide to 465 woredas (districts) by June 2025. The integration of RISE resources within the government’s healthcare systems ensures the availability and sustainability of these valuable resources, and their contributions to healthy family life. The good news is that the systems are in place. With additional funding to cover technical trainings and placements of health professionals, healthcare centers could more comprehensively apply what works, and more, if not all, young couples seeking family planning could receive the services they need.

“Smart Start is bringing a lot of changes, especially in increasing awareness in adolescents of this age group. They are now an integral part of the health system.”

— Health Outreach Coordinator at the Government Health Center where he works