

## Improving Market Linkages through Private Health-Sector Trade Fairs

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded Banking on Health project expands access to financing and business-support services for private health providers, thereby improving their capacity to deliver high-quality reproductive health (RH) and family planning (FP) services. The private health sector in many developing countries is fragmented. Private health providers typically are isolated in their practices, face barriers to access productive inputs, and have few opportunities to network or stay abreast of clinical developments. To expand RH/FP in the private sector, it is important not just to consider clinical issues but also to address the business constraints that providers face. Strengthening market linkages for private health care businesses can help them access the inputs they need to grow, improve their practices, and invest in priority public-health services, such as FP.

### Private Health-Sector Trade Fairs

Trade fairs are an innovation Banking on Health developed to break through the isolation and fragmentation that characterizes the private health sector in many countries. These trade fairs build linkages by creating a one-stop marketplace where private providers connect with financial institutions, pharmaceutical companies, equipment suppliers, training institutes, and representatives of the Ministry of Health and donor-funded projects. These one-day events are platforms to discuss topical clinical and business issues and serve as a forum for private health providers to talk with policymakers. Ultimately the fairs impact the scale and quality of service provision in the private sector, with an emphasis on priority health services related to RH, FP, and HIV/AIDS.

While Banking on Health tailors the trade fairs to different country contexts, each event includes the following elements:

- *A panel of presentations* including testimonies from owners of private healthcare businesses, clinical updates from health experts, management tips from business-development specialists, policy guidelines from public-sector representatives, and information about financial products from bankers
- *An exhibition hall* including displays by financial institutions, pharmaceutical companies, equipment suppliers, training institutes, USAID partner projects, and FP and other health nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); secondary service providers (such as solar-light manufacturers or medical-book publishers) also are invited, and exhibitors typically pay to participate
- *Links to training and other technical-assistance services* that the project supports (for instance, in Uganda an introductory business training session on cash-flow management and access to financing follows each trade fair)



### Key Outcomes of the Trade Fairs

Banking on Health has organized 17 private health-sector trade fairs in four countries (Ethiopia, the Philippines, Uganda, and Zambia) with support

from local professional associations, USAID project partners, and commercial exhibitors. A total of 3,355 health providers, (representing midwives, nurses, medical doctors, pharmacists, drug shop owners, clinical officers, and laboratory technicians) and 214 exhibitors have participated at these events, 45 of which have been microfinance institutions or commercial banks.

Private health providers react favorably to the trade fairs and most of them request that the events be organized on a continuing basis. Results from Uganda show that trade fairs not only help expand access to financing and increase contacts with suppliers but also may lead to an increase in FP service provision (see below for more details). The trade fairs benefit exhibitors, professional associations, and public-sector representatives as well.

For instance, financial institutions can interface directly with health professionals to learn about their financing needs, tailor their financial products, and grow their investments in the sector; public-sector representatives appreciate this channel for disseminating their policy messages; professional associations can recruit members and broker purchasing relationships with different companies; and suppliers initiate business relationships with each other.

### **Banking on Health Trade Fairs in Uganda**

Since December 2006 Banking on Health has organized nine trade fairs in Uganda that 1,700 private providers have attended. The program focuses on reaching towns where private providers are isolated and are an important source of health care for poor communities. Providers who attend the trade fairs tend to operate small-scale facilities. On average, 53 percent of attendees were midwives or nurses, 13 percent were drug shop owners, 11 percent were clinical officers, 8 percent were medical doctors, and 2 percent were pharmacists. Other participants (12 percent) included lab technicians and administrators.

Banking on Health sought buy-in and ownership from stakeholders to ensure the trade fairs remain

relevant for the private sector and responsive to the needs of different professional cadres. It formed a voluntary steering committee consisting of six professional provider associations, Ministry of Health representatives, and commercial suppliers that offers technical guidance and support in organizing the events. Banking on Health built the capacity of a local social-marketing NGO to host the trade fairs in the future as part of its sustainability strategy.

Banking on Health administered baseline and follow-up surveys at each event to assess their effectiveness. More than 75 percent of providers found the trade fair to be “extremely useful” and 90 percent of respondents were interested in attending a future fair. Seventy-seven percent of providers indicated that they learned new tips on business growth and 66 percent

of them learned where to access financing.

Follow-on surveys were conducted with more than one-fifth of participants four months after every event to assess changes in their business relationships and service statistics. Results indicated that 64 percent of providers had contacted an



exhibitor they met at the trade fair, with the greatest number contacting financial institutions (84 percent), followed by equipment suppliers (38 percent) and pharmaceutical companies (26 percent). Thirty-three percent of respondents accessed financing after attending a trade fair. Providers also cited increases in the types and scale of RH/FP services they offered following the trade fair. There was evidence of increased provision of condoms (44 percent), counseling (42 percent), oral contraceptives (41 percent), and injectables (20 percent). Service delivery expanded, with 57 percent of providers noting an increase in monthly FP client visits and 71 percent citing an increase in monthly client visits overall. Banking on Health believes that by gaining access to financing and making new contacts with contraceptive and other suppliers, providers were able to expand service delivery.

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