

INCREASED ACCESS TO FAMILY PLANNING TRANSFORMING LIVES

By Jacky Achan

In Uganda, the unmet need for family planning methods varies widely across regions, which is clearly reflected in the number of children born in different areas.

Urban regions like Kampala, Wakiso and Mukono have relatively low fertility rates, with Kampala's rate ranging from 3.3 to five children per woman.

In contrast, rural areas such as Zombo report high fertility rates, with women averaging 9.6 children each. This stark difference means a woman in Zombo could have up to 10 children, while a woman in Kampala typically has around three.

"This disparity highlights the challenge of achieving a well-planned population with better living standards," says Dr Moses Okello, the programmes manager at DKT International Uganda.

"Currently, nearly half of Uganda's population is under the age of 15, creating a high dependency ratio, with many dependents relying on a smaller workforce. This high dependency is unfavourable to economic growth," Okello explains.

"To change this, it's essential to address unmet need for family planning among women of reproductive age. Access to family planning options helps individuals, families and communities manage their fertility and also improve their health, contributing to the sustainable growth of communities and country.

It is within this context that development partners have stepped in to support programmes that expand access to family planning and reproductive health services.

DUTCH DRIVING ACCESS TO FAMILY PLANNING

One such initiative translating this commitment into action is the ACTUATE project, which is expanding access to sexual and reproductive health services across Uganda.

The ACTUATE project, running from July 2021 to June 2027, is worth \$10m and is funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The project partners are DKT International, Population



Dr Queen Amina Biobaku



Dr Moses Okello

GOVT SUPPORT AND LONG-TERM IMPACT

The Ministry of Health has been a key partner in the project's success. Dr Okello says DKT is proud to complement government efforts.

"The project fits into Uganda's National Development Plan and aligns with the Health Sector Development Plan, ultimately contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals."

Services Uganda (PSI), Women First Digital, IPAS Africa Alliance and Community Health Rights Network. Their combined effort focuses on improving access to contraceptives, empowering women and enhancing collaboration between the public and private sectors.

Under DKT Uganda, various initiatives have been launched to promote sexual and reproductive health (SRH), such as the "Girl Got Plans" radio advertisements and billboards for different contraceptive brands.

"These marketing efforts reach people through radio, TV and online platforms, while also engaging in experiential marketing with events, activations and direct interactions," states Okello.

One of DKT's key partners, the Community Health Rights Network, plays a vital role in local outreach. They conduct community dialogues and house-to-house visits to engage with individuals and groups such as religious leaders, politicians and law enforcement officers.

These efforts help empower women and educate them on available contraceptive options, while challenging social norms that may limit access to SRH services.

"In urban areas like Kampala, where family

IMPACT

The project tracks its success through metrics such as Couple Years of Protection (CYP), which measures the consistent use of contraceptives over time. For example, if someone uses an intrauterine device (IUD), a small, T-shaped device placed inside the womb (uterus) to prevent pregnancy or implant for a year, it counts as one CYP. Last year, DKT Uganda reached 76,000 couple years of protection (CYPs) through 80 clinics, contributing to a total of 1.2 million CYPs across the project.

"These figures help assess the reduction in unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions, ultimately showing the impact of family planning efforts," Okello states.

Dr Jimmy Komakech, who runs Sanyu Hospital in Katooke town, Wakiso district, highlights the transformative impact of the ACTUATE initiative on the community, particularly in reducing unplanned pregnancies among adolescents.

"Previously, we saw many young people using harmful remedies for abortion, often leading to severe complications like excessive bleeding," Komakech explains. "Last year, however, we only had one case of septic abortion, which is a significant drop from the 10 cases we used to handle annually. This improvement is thanks to the ACTUATE initiative with DTK."

The initiative has not only reduced health risks, but also improved access to reproductive health services.

Komakech notes a positive shift in community attitudes towards family planning.

"People are now more open

about seeking help, compared to the past when they would shy away. In addition, men are more involved, coming with their wives to choose family planning methods together."

There has also been a noticeable increase in the use of IUDs, with declining negative attitudes towards the method due to continued counselling efforts.

For Jane Mpanga, a registered midwife, the ACTUATE initiative has had a profound impact on the facility she runs and the wider community.

"I started a small domiciliary clinic in Kireka town, Wakiso district, that has now evolved into the Good Samaritan Medical Centre," she says.

From handling 120 people a month, the facility now attends to 450, Mpanga adds.

The services offered at Good Samaritan Medical Centre, including family planning, HIV counselling, cervical cancer screening, malaria treatment and maternity services, contributing significantly to community health improvements.

Both Komakech and Mpanga agree that the ACTUATE initiative has not only improved healthcare access, but also empowered the community to take charge of their reproductive health.

The ACTUATE project, Okello adds, has made significant strides in filling gaps in sexual and reproductive health services, particularly in regions with historically low access. And the aim is to reduce the high rates of teenage pregnancy and unsafe abortions, especially in rural areas where information about family planning is limited.

planning use is high, there is still a high number of abortions. It means they are getting intimate with their partners not to procreate, but for other reasons. So, they should be given contraceptives," Okello notes.

Uganda has high rates of unplanned pregnancies at 50% and of these, 30% end in abortion, often done unsafely. Dr Okello explains that these abortions are considered "unsafe" as they are not performed in approved medical settings or by untrained practitioners and often unregulated methods are used.

COLLABORATION WITH THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

The project's collaboration with both the public and private sectors is crucial. DKT partners with 120

pharmacies and 80 clinics across Uganda, reaching between 50,000 to 70,000 people annually. By working with the private sector, DKT helps keep services affordable and ensures that SRH commodities are well-stocked and accessible.

Dr Queen Amina Biobaku, the country manager for DKT International Uganda, notes that the project's initial phase was slow, but over time, it has gained momentum and had a significant impact.

"Many private facilities, which initially started as grassroots efforts, have grown and expanded. They now offer privacy, better quality of service and youth-friendly spaces, attracting more young people seeking confidential and affordable care," she says.



Access to family planning helps people manage their fertility and improve their health, contributing to the sustainable growth of communities and the country