Learning Brief Number 1: Conservation and Family Planning: What is the value of integrating family planning into conservation projects?

By: Cara Honzak and Judy Oglethorpe
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The following brief is an abridged version of an article that has been submitted to a journal for publication.

Summary
Conservation organizations have integrated family planning into site-based conservation activities in selected countries for almost two decades yet lacked strong evidence of the approach’s value to conservation. Today this approach has come to be known as the integrated “population, health and environment” approach, or “PHE.” Drawing on lessons from early integrated conservation and development projects (known as ICDPs), PHE projects aimed to be more targeted yet still integrated.

In 2004, with support from the United States Agency for International Development’s Office of Population and Reproductive Health and Johnson & Johnson, WWF launched an effort to an answer the question, “What is the value of integrating family planning into conservation projects, through a PHE approach?”

Methods
The approach used to conduct this research was to combine original qualitative research with a desk review of existing PHE projects implemented by the conservation sector. Working closely with one of the leading organizations in measuring conservation outcomes, called Foundations of Success, WWF designed a methodology that would use simple but cutting-edge tools in conservation science to apply rigor to answering this question. While the methodology was not equivalent to operations research, it was affordable, and WWF believed that this type of research would help the entire conservation sector focus on how to proceed in the field of family planning within a conservation context.

The aim of the analysis was to identify evidence of linkages between family planning interventions and conservation outcomes in conservation field projects. The analysis examined a portfolio of eight projects across six countries that had: primary end goals of conservation, been involved for at least three years in bringing family planning to local communities, and substantial amounts of monitoring and evaluation. WWF staff conducted semi-structured interviews with field project managers and constructed diagrams articulating project staff assumptions about linkages between family planning interventions and conservation outcomes. WWF staff then solicited existing data from projects, grouped assumption patterns according to those found in the literature, and finally, synthesized evidence related to assumption patterns.

Key Findings
The analysis had two types of findings: findings related to assumptions of the practitioners we interviewed, and findings related to the evidence available among the projects reviewed. Assumption patterns can also be thought of as practitioner “hypotheses” about linkages or “convictions” about linkages. “Evidence” includes both quantitative data and qualitative information.
The conservation practitioners we interviewed shared in common three general patterns of assumptions about how FP interventions affect conservation outcomes. We labeled these patterns: “decrease in human fertility,” “increase in women’s empowerment,” and “increase in trust, goodwill, and entry points for conservation.” A fourth general pattern of assumptions that we labeled “increase in cost efficiency and effectiveness” was not found among the practitioners we interviewed, but was commonly “observed” by WWF staff. Following is a description of these assumption patterns:

1) **Hypothesized linkage “Decrease in Human Fertility”**: Family planning interventions, integrated into site-based conservation efforts, are believed to increase use of family planning in remote, underserved communities, helping to reduce fertility and slow population growth, leading to reduced pressure on natural resources in the long term.

2) **Hypothesized linkage “Increase in Women’s Empowerment”**: Family planning interventions, integrated into site-based conservation efforts, are believed to empower women, thereby increasing conservation capacity through increasing women’s involvement in natural resource management, conservation and the formal economy.

3) **Hypothesized linkage “Increases in Trust, Goodwill, and Entry Points for Conservation”**: Family planning interventions, integrated into site-based conservation efforts, are believed to generate trust and goodwill towards conservation organizations and their environmental partners (including creating entry points into communities), leading to increased community involvement in conservation activities.

4) **Hypothesized linkage “Increases in cost efficiency and effectiveness”**: Family planning interventions, integrated into site-based conservation efforts, are believed to generate cost efficiencies and effectiveness for conservation, such as by sharing resources with an entity delivering family planning.

The projects we reviewed also shared in common two additional sub-patterns of assumptions that are actually nuanced versions of the general patterns. Sub-patterns relate respectively to targeting of youth, and using project strategies that rely on building awareness of PHE issues.

We divided each of the hypothesized linkage patterns stated by the practitioners we interviewed into: immediate results (such as increased family planning use), intermediate results and long term results. While the details of each practitioners’ assumption patterns differed from one practitioner to another, we found a surprising number of similar elements across the assumption patterns put forth by our interviewees, including: the general order of the results that were assumed to follow from the family planning interventions, the types of interventions that were assumed to relate to certain types of intermediate results, and the basic relationships among the factors related to direct threats to conservation outcomes.

Among the practitioners we interviewed, the “decrease in human fertility” and “increase in women’s empowerment” linkages are identical in the immediate or early stages of the linkages. Practitioners assume that before subsequent results related to fertility and women’s empowerment can be achieved, the use of modern family planning must first increase. Among the projects we reviewed, strong evidence existed to support the assumption that family planning interventions implemented by conservation organizations lead to an increase in family planning use in the remote areas where these projects are implemented.
This was the only strong evidence about assumptions patterns found in our analysis. Despite the fact that one of our criteria for project selection was that a substantial amount of monitoring and evaluation data had been collected in relation to a project, the amount of evidence available among the projects we reviewed to support other types of linkages or to support the intermediate or advanced stages of any linkage type was weak.

**Major Implications**

The analysis provides lessons that should help the conservation sector determine next steps in research and project development in integrating family planning with conservation activities. The projects we reviewed comprise almost the entire population of recent PHE projects implemented by the conservation sector. Our analysis also represents the first systematically gathered documentations of lessons from multiple countries about evidence related to the value to conservation of taking this integrated approach. Lessons below are explored in the journal article that WWF hopes to publish within the year.

- **It should be possible to establish a set of common indicators for PHE projects, in spite of often cited concerns that suggest otherwise.** The prevalence of only four general categories of assumptions among practitioners we interviewed indicates the existence of a shared understanding about why conservation organizations choose to undertake these types of projects, and may also be related to the fact that many PHE projects conducted similar types of interventions—especially family planning interventions.

- **“Decrease in fertility” and “increase in women’s empowerment” linkage types might be more relevant to conservation organizations undertaking PHE projects than the other linkage types, because these patterns were put forth by so many of the practitioners we interviewed, and in both cases there was good evidence to support the intermediate stages of the linkages. In the case of women’s empowerment, in particular, conservation organizations need to boost their own capacity to develop specific project strategies related to those assumption patterns and develop relevant indicators.**

- **Future research should also focus on building PHE practitioner capacity on monitoring and evaluating indicators relevant to “increase in trust, goodwill, and entry points for conservation” and “increase in cost efficiency and effectiveness” linkage types.**

- **Persistence and dedication to quality data collection in PHE within the conservation sector is still strongly needed.** The extent of evidence available in relation to all of the assumptions presented by the practitioners we interviewed demonstrates that the field of family planning in site-based conservation is still young, and stronger research methodologies and data are still lacking. Such data is crucial to ensuring continuing support to PHE projects within conservation.

- **In order to gather an evidence base that will fully answer the research question proposed in this analysis, research and project timelines should extend beyond the typical horizons of 5 to 6 years.** One of the key assumptions of the “decrease in human fertility” linkage was a reduction in family size, but changes in family size cannot be measured until women complete their reproductive years. This makes it challenging for a five or six year project to accurately measure these kinds of results. Shorter project cycles also mean that, for example, if additional project inputs are needed to ensure that changes in family size ultimately lead to changes in conservation outcomes, those inputs may not be present when needed.
• Future projects should aim to measure health and time savings benefits of family planning for women, in order to increase the evidence base in relation to the women’s empowerment linkage. A women’s empowerment linkage – such as the assumption that smaller, more manageable families give women more time and energy to spend on conservation-related activities for example- appears to be highly relevant to the conservation sector, but is also poorly documented.

• If the PHE community wants to measure the specific contribution of family planning to increasing goodwill towards conservation, then more rigorous measurement and project design frameworks are needed. Evidence for increasing goodwill towards conservation was inconclusive among the project we reviewed. No project had undertaken family planning interventions in complete isolation from other interventions. An evaluation conducted by David Carr in 2008 of 8 WWF PHE projects concluded that it is “overwhelmingly” evident that WWF’s population and health work buys goodwill for environmental conservation outcomes (Carr 2008). While our analysis could not confirm this conclusion, the projects we reviewed provided evidence suggesting that broad health interventions, and possibly family planning by itself, packaged with micro-credit opportunities for women, have a positive impact on goodwill towards conservation and create entry points for conservation.

• Further study is required to determine which combinations of PHE-type interventions are most critical to increasing goodwill towards conservation, i.e., FP, health, microcredit.

• The linkage type that we have called “increasing cost effectiveness and efficiency” deserves exploration by the PHE community. To do this, PHE practitioners will need common indicators and frameworks for measuring efficiencies and cost effectiveness. This linkage type was not well documented by our analysis, but was well explored by the IPOLCORM operations research project in the Philippines. IPOLCORM produced some of the most reliable information to date about the validity of the linkages explored in the WWF analysis, although its findings were limited to a single country. IPOLCORM concluded that integrated approaches had a higher positive impact at a lower total cost than single-sector interventions (D’Agnes, et al 2010).

• WWF’s findings, coupled with IPOLCORM findings, suggest that conservation organizations which integrate family planning into site-based projects, may want to consider inclusion of integrated PHE awareness and youth-targeting as project elements. This conclusion is drawn in spite of the relative lack of evidence among the projects we reviewed related to these sub-linkages. It is based on a fairly significant number of projects among those we reviewed that assumed these linkages were important, and additional IPOLCORM findings that suggested strong links between integrated projects and changing sexual practices among youth/declines in income poverty among youth (D’Agnes, et al 2010). Among the project included in the WWF review, data on youth-relevant indicators simply was not included in monitoring frameworks or was not well documented.

• In closing, we conclude that there is a good basis of evidence upon which to conclude that there may be value to adding family planning to site-based conservation, through integrated PHE approaches- for the sake of conservation. However it is still too soon to make strong claims about the extent of any such value. It is also clear that the entire PHE-interested community could benefit from continuing to research the topic, to make sure all parties understand the potential value and limitations of the approach. Research could explore priority topics such as: linkages with women’s empowerment, and how quickly this approach might impact governance, particularly of
natural resources; how health and family planning interventions build goodwill and trust among key stakeholder groups for conservation, and change behavior and attitudes towards issues that are key to conservation success; and, innovative ways in which conservation organizations can facilitate community access to family planning and health services at little or no extra cost to conservation programs.

References


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