

The Window of Opportunity Project

Integrating maternal and child health services and childhood development interventions in South Africa and Mozambique

There is a crucial window of opportunity between conception and a child's second birthday to influence the child's health and future well-being. Investing in health and development during this 1,000-day period can help to break the cycle of poverty in low-resource settings.

The physical and emotional health of women during pregnancy, the nutritional and physical status of young children, and the socio-emotional and intellectual stimulation of children before age 2 all need support during this period. When a child suffers from poor health before age 2, especially malnutrition, it can lead to irreversible physical stunting and cognitive impairment. Evidence shows that children who are well-nourished early in life tend to perform better in school, are more productive, and have better long-term health than children who do not receive proper nutrition.

During the 1,000-day window of opportunity, health care workers provide the primary point of contact to reach women and children. By incorporating social and developmental supports into primary health care, a child's cognitive and physical development can be stimulated to help create a more prosperous future.

INTERVENING TO IMPROVE SYSTEMS, SERVICES, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Window of Opportunity project is a five-year effort led by PATH to improve the health and development of children under age 2 in South Africa and Mozambique. Supported by BHP Billiton Sustainable Communities, the project has integrated maternal and child health interventions with early childhood development programs.

Through collaboration with local partners in four districts in South Africa and one in Mozambique, the project has strengthened the planning and management of health and development systems, improved the range and quality of essential health and development services, and increased the

engagement and empowerment of communities to use these essential services. It has already reached 750,000 children and pregnant women and strengthened services for a combined population of approximately 4 million.



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The project has built on existing structures, interventions, organizations, and relationships at the national and provincial levels to undertake the following activities:

- Using collaborative relationships with intersectoral teams of government departments to strengthen local health and development systems and community structures to provide services responsive to community needs.
- Partnering with local health care centers and community-based organizations to improve the quality and range of clinical and community-based services.
- Building community ownership and capacity to increase behaviors among caregivers and community members that positively affect the health and development of young children.
- Expanding the knowledge base and fostering widespread adoption of project lessons to extend health gains beyond the life of the project and ensure sustainability.



PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The Window of Opportunity project has developed and implemented integrated child health and development interventions that have improved maternal and child health and nutrition outcomes. Notable achievements include:



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- **Creation of intersectoral forums.** The project has facilitated the creation or expansion of district intersectoral forums that bring together maternal and child health and early childhood development services.
- **Creation of technical tools.** In collaboration with government partners, PATH has built on existing policies and guidelines to develop technical tools—such as data collection and analysis tools—to strengthen maternal and child health and nutrition services.
- **Capacity building.** The project expanded the capacity of supervisors and service providers in health care facilities by providing training and mentoring on essential care packages and skills.
- **Community partnerships.** PATH has implemented a model approach for selection of community-based organizations (CBOs) for capacity building. This approach has been embraced by government partners and communities.
- **Support for CBOs.** Because of the project’s support for community-based health education, health promotion, and referrals, districts have reported greater adherence to

treatment regimens for HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, increased childhood immunization rates, and greater numbers of children being exclusively breastfed.

PROMISE FOR THE FUTURE

The Window of Opportunity project’s quality improvement tools and health worker trainings have changed behaviors among caregivers and improved health and early childhood development in South Africa and Mozambique. They have the potential to create lasting change in other settings as well.

Governments and donors have an opportunity to invest in scaling up projects like Window of Opportunity that effectively integrate efforts to improve maternal and child health and childhood development. PATH and other groups must continue to examine how interventions can best be combined for the greatest impact. Together, we can create sustainable change to improve the lives of millions of women and young children.



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