



## Forging innovative partnerships for change

### Choice prevails in Afghanistan

If asked to single out one country where the prospects for contraceptive choice have just improved, Afghanistan is probably not the first that would come to mind. But that is precisely what has happened. With funding from the Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition's Innovation Fund, the local affiliate of Marie Stopes International, MSI Afghanistan, successfully assembled parliamentarians from across the country – men, women, representatives of radical Islamic parties – to form the country's first Sexual and Reproductive Health Caucus. Thanks to the support of that Caucus, and the involvement of key religious leaders, Afghanistan's national regulatory authority approved in 2012 the special registration of the two-rod contraceptive implant, Jadelle. It was an uphill battle – one that saw stiff opposition from lecturers at Kabul University, and even from senior members of the Pharmacy Department. But in the end, the cause of choice prevailed. Afghanistan's women are today one step closer to a wider range of contraceptive options.

#### **CLEAR OBJECTIVES, COMPLEX APPROACH**

In September 2012, MSI Afghanistan became one of five Southern NGOs selected to receive funds under Round 9 of the Coalition's Innovation Fund. Their objectives were straightforward: a designated line item for family planning

(FP) in the national budget, more donor resources for FP, and regulatory approval for implants and emergency contraceptive pills. MSI's approach, however, has been anything but straightforward.

In just four short months, much has already been accomplished. Navigating the complex social relationships as only a national institution can do, MSI has brought together political adversaries, helped overcome deeply-rooted cultural divides and fostered broad-based multi-sector, multi-party support for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). MSI's engagement with the Caucus has given way to a national dialogue where even the Minister of Public Health is advocating openly in favour of family planning. According to MSI's Director Farhad Javid, this opening was the direct result of support from the Innovation Fund.

“If MPs can take SRHR into their own hands, they become its promoters. This sends a strong message to all other decision-makers”

~ Farhad Javid

## LEVERAGING GRANT MONEY FOR FUTURE PROSPECTS

Looking ahead, MSI sees a number of prospects on the horizon. Regulatory approval of emergency contraception remains in sight as does the potential for increased donor funding to SRHR. In fact, MSI hopes to leverage the resources of its Innovation Fund grant to seek financial assistance from the Lithuanian Government. Lithuanian troops will withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014; the Lithuanian Embassy in Kabul has expressed a desire to leave behind a legacy of development assistance.

And lastly, MSI is currently in discussions with the Ministry of Religion to revive its “Sisters Department”, a national programme in which the wives of imams are empowered to speak out on the issue of family planning within their communities. Javid sees these sisters as complementing the message of the Caucus, and the more proactive stance of the Minister of Public Health. “You have politicians talking about family planning; you have religious people talking about family planning; and you have public health people who would be talking about family planning, anyway. The impact of this virtual circle, both in terms of policy change and changing behavior and communication, is potentially immense”, he says.



An Afghan community health worker with her baby

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## MSI Afghanistan

Established in 2002, Marie Stopes International Afghanistan works as a health strengthening mechanism providing maternal health services via 14 centres in central, southwest and northern Afghanistan. A social marketing programme distributes short and long term contraceptives to private providers.

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## Award

**Recipient: Marie Stopes International Afghanistan**

**Amount: US\$39,975**

**Date: September 2012 – August 2013**

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### What is the Innovation Fund?

The Innovation Fund was established in 2008, through a generous grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Managed by the Coalition Secretariat, the Innovation Fund has to date made available more than US\$2.2M in small grants (maximum US\$200,000 per grant) to Coalition partners. The grants – more than 20 altogether – have yielded new tools, supported advocacy and research, leveraged millions of dollars in subsequent program funding, and launched a host of new initiatives across the Global South.

Traditionally, the Coalition has defined the concept of “innovation” broadly to include any promising new idea with the potential to bring about positive change. Innovation needn’t mean a radical departure from previous practice. It could also include new approaches to existing processes or the implementation of an existing strategy in a new context, especially if this adaptation leads to replication or scaling-up at country level.

### The Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition

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