

Maternal health policy decision making in Ghana: the pivotal role of policy actors and context

Policy brief

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INTRODUCTION

The development path of health policy whether intent as articulated in documents or practice as implemented can be difficult to predict because it is a complex and intertwined decision process and does not necessarily follow a particular format. Understanding why some national policies have a long life and are maintained over time despite periodic threats to their existence can give insights into this complexity.

METHODS

The study used the stages heuristic policy making perspective and concepts of power, context and policy actors to analyse agenda setting and formulation decision processes related to national maternal fee exemption policies. It was conducted as multiple case studies of nine discrete national maternal fee exemption policies using reviews of archival materials, contemporary records, media content; in-depth interviews; and participant observation.

KEY FINDINGS

Maternal fee exemption policies made at the national level included free healthcare services related to one or more of antenatal, delivery and postnatal services starting from the initial introduction of free antenatal service in 1963 to free maternal care in 2008. The free



antenatal service trajectory taken in 1963 was not reversed, despite varied policy actors and contextual factors. This was because:

1. Policy actors (agenda-directors, approvers, advisors and advocates) relied on context and on each other for financial support, expertise, experience and political resources and created a network of influence to maintain the maternal policy agenda.
2. Policy agenda advisers as policy champions mobilised strategies and tactics in the form of commitment and consensus building to maintain the maternal policy agenda.
3. Politicians over the years participated in decision process to direct and approve the policy agenda.
4. Donor support and international health agendas moved in favour of maternal fee exemptions decisions. However the initial policy agenda (in 1963) evolved rather than remained static over the years – including

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expansions and contractions at each agenda decision period. Contextual factors and policy actors influenced the timely manner in which policy content was formulated and level of deviation from the intended agenda at each specific decision period. For instance;

1. Contextual factors such as declined health budget allocation and high maternal mortality presented policy actors with an option to formulate the policy content in a less timely manner and away from the intended agenda of 1997 free maternal care presidential directive.

2. Whilst, within the context of HIPC grant and Ghana poverty reduction strategy, maternal fee exemption policy for four deprived regions was formulated in a timely manner and closely linked to the poverty strategy.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To maintain policy issues on the national agenda actors and stakeholders need to be aware that:

1. The context in which a policy choice is made is critical to the policy's success or otherwise and its ability to sustain over time.
2. Factors influencing national level policy decisions go beyond local evidence and situations, and include

international agenda and donor treaties with government.

3. National policy making strategies should include analysis of both local and international context and how to take advantage of opportunities and constraints that the interrelating contexts present.

4. Understanding the interests and power sources of varied policy actors should not be ignored in the pursuit of sustained policy agenda.

5. Actors and stakeholders who want to influence and sustain national agendas need to pay attention to context and policy actors in any strategy.



Koduah, A., van Dijk, H., & Agyepong, I. A. (2015). The role of policy actors and contextual factors in policy agenda setting and formulation: maternal fee exemption policies in Ghana over four and a half decades. Health Research Policy and Systems, 13(1), 27