

# Advancing Reproductive Health in Crisis: An Evaluation of Localized Advocacy and Youth Capacity-Building During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** This technical report evaluates the 2021 programmatic progress of The Forum for Family Planning and Development amidst the severe health service disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines. Utilizing a qualitative desk review of annual program reports, the study assesses interventions across Albay, Cebu, Palawan, Ifugao, and Benguet in three core areas: awareness-raising, capacity-building, and multi-level advocacy. Findings reveal that transitioning to digital and hybrid platforms enabled successful youth-led reproductive health campaigns and multi-sectoral training for public educators and local government officials. Key advocacy milestones include the deployment of the MOMCHAT ICT dashboard for maternal health forecasting and the successful lobbying for localized reproductive health funding. Ultimately, the report concludes that sustaining public health initiatives during crises requires leveraging real-time data, targeting marginalized sub-populations like night school students, and empowering grassroots youth institutions such as the Sangguniang Kabataan.

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## 1 Introduction

In 2021, the Philippines continued to grapple with the severe, compounded impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond the immediate viral threat, prolonged community quarantine measures and lockdowns caused profound disruptions to essential health services, particularly maternal and adolescent reproductive health. As national and local health systems became overwhelmed by the urgent demands of COVID-19 patient care, critical resources, funding, and clinical attention were heavily diverted away from public health programs, including family planning and maternal care [1]. Strict travel restrictions and the fear of contracting the virus in medical facilities further deterred women from seeking ante-natal check-ups and modern contraception. Consequently, the pandemic severely worsened pre-existing vulnerabilities; assessments by the University of the Philippines Population Institute (UPPI) and UNFPA projected up to a 26% increase in maternal deaths (approximately 670 additional deaths) and a staggering 42% rise in unintended pregnancies (amounting to 2.56 million cases) due to these pandemic-induced service disruptions [1].

Amidst this systemic strain, the overburdened public health sector left highly vulnerable populations—especially women, girls, and marginalized youth—at severe risk. Because of the government's massive operational shift toward COVID-19 containment, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) were forced to dramatically level up their efforts. Our partner CSOs, like the Roots of Health in Palawan, and GM Bicol for SRHR in Albay, had to rapidly

innovate, adopting digital technologies and alternative community-based approaches to complement the government, protect civic spaces, and fill the critical gaps in health education and service delivery [2, 3].

Navigating these immense operational challenges and shrinking civic spaces, The Forum for Family Planning and Development strategically pivoted its interventions across digital, hybrid, and grassroots platforms to ensure that reproductive health remained a priority. In 2021, despite the localized lockdowns, The Forum successfully sustained and expanded its vital work across its key geographical targets: Albay, Cebu, Palawan, Ifugao, and Benguet. The objective of this formal technical report is to evaluate the organization's progress and strategic impact during this critical year by examining its programmatic outputs across three core dimensions: 1) awareness-raising activities, 2) capacity-building initiatives, and 3) multi-level advocacy efforts.

## **2 Methods**

This evaluation utilizes a qualitative desk review of internal program documents [4], specifically drawing upon the data and narratives documented in The Forum's 2021 Annual Report. Data regarding programmatic outputs, stakeholder engagement, and strategic local interventions were extracted and categorized into the three focal areas. This classification allows for a structured assessment of the organization's overall efficacy, strategic reach, and systemic impact during the reporting year.

## **3 Result and Discussion**

### **3.1. Awareness-Raising Activities**

The 2021 initiatives demonstrated a strategic reliance on youth-led mobilization to enhance public awareness of adolescent reproductive health (ARH). By engaging Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) officials, the organization facilitated grassroots-level digital campaigns, including online forums and Facebook Live sessions. Furthermore, following targeted leadership training, the Cebu City Federation of Student Council Officers successfully developed localized Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) materials tailored specifically for their peers.

The transition to digital awareness campaigns not only mitigated the physical constraints imposed by pandemic lockdowns but also democratized the delivery of reproductive health information. Similar to evidences from island province where Facebook served as a useful tool for health workers to respond to queries of populations in need to reproductive health education [5]. By empowering youth leaders to design their own IEC materials, The Forum effectively leveraged peer-to-peer communication, which literature consistently identifies as highly effective for adolescent engagement. Information interventions empower adolescents by improving their knowledge, awareness, and behaviors through trainings, IEC materials, symposia, and social mobilization [6]. This indicates that future awareness campaigns must continue to position the youth not merely as passive recipients of health information, but as active co-creators of cultural and health messaging [7].

### **3.2. Capacity-Building Activities**

The organization heavily invested in training key institutional gatekeepers—educators, health personnel, and local officials—to champion reproductive health safely and effectively. Specifically, 146 public school teachers were trained to bridge instructional gaps and effectively deliver Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) to their learners. Additionally, 46 to 48 health personnel from the Department of Education (DepEd) division offices in Cebu's Tri-cities underwent capacity-building to better communicate and advocate for ARH. At the community

level, over 90 SK and barangay officials (including three Federation Presidents) participated in extensive reproductive health issue orientations.

These findings illustrate a comprehensive, "ecosystem" approach to health education. Through equipping teachers and school health personnel, The Forum ensures that CSE is institutionalized within the formal education sector rather than treated as a peripheral or taboo subject. Simultaneously, training local government and SK officials fortifies community-level support. The primary implication of these findings is that capacity-building must be multi-sectoral to be sustainable [8]; educators can only effectively teach CSE if local health personnel and community leaders provide a corresponding supportive environment and accessible referral services outside the classroom [9].

### **3.3. Multi-Level Advocacy Activities**

Advocacy efforts in 2021 successfully engaged both local government units (LGUs) and educational bodies to enact systemic policy changes. In Daraga, Albay, the pilot of the Municipality-Optimized Maternal and Child Health Assistance Tracker (MOMCHAT)—a web and SMS-based dashboard—enabled local health offices to forecast maternal health care supply and demand accurately. In the Visayas region, the "Reach Youth in the Margins" project successfully advocated for the ARH needs of Night High School students in Cebu City, Mandaue City, and Lapu-Lapu City, actively linking these highly vulnerable adolescents to responsive health facilities. Concurrently, engagements with SK Federations resulted in the development of youth policies anchored on the Philippine Youth Development Plan, which successfully culminated in the actual allocation of local LGU funds for reproductive health activities.

The MOMCHAT pilot underscores the critical role of real-time, ICT-based data in agile health governance, allowing LGUs to shift from reactive treatments to proactive maternal care forecasting. Furthermore, focusing on Night High School students highlights a critical equity lens; these adolescents often belong to the most economically disadvantaged families and cannot access standard public health programs that operate exclusively during daytime hours. Finally, securing SK budget allocations translates abstract advocacy into tangible, sustainable local policy. This demonstrates that multi-level advocacy is most successful when it marries technological innovation with targeted equity interventions and legislative funding [9].

## **4. Conclusion**

The 2021 programmatic outputs of The Forum for Family Planning and Development, Inc. reflect a highly adaptive and resilient approach to reproductive health advocacy amid a severe global health crisis. The results across awareness generation, capacity-building, and systemic advocacy yield three crucial lessons for future public health interventions:

1) The MOMCHAT pilot proves that information and communication technology (ICT) solutions are vital. Providing LGUs with real-time reproductive health data empowers them to make rapid, evidence-based policy decisions that directly save maternal lives, especially when resources are strained by competing emergencies.

2) Inclusive urban development requires distinct, localized interventions. Marginalized sub-populations, such as night school students, fall through the cracks of traditional health infrastructures. Programs must be specifically designed to accommodate their unique schedules and socioeconomic realities.

3) The Sangguniang Kabataan has proven to be the most critical partner for the Department of Education in bridging gaps in sexual and reproductive health. While

DepEd delivers formal curriculum-based education, empowered SKs are uniquely positioned to sustain this education, build community skills, facilitate policy consultations, and most importantly, allocate the necessary local funding to keep youth health programs alive.

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