Family planning is vital to economic development and to maternal and child health. At a summit in July 2012, the global community set the ambitious goal of making modern contraception available to 120 million new users in 69 low-income countries by 2020—the Family Planning 2020 (FP2020) goal. The summit representatives recognized that high-quality family planning data were essential to monitoring progress toward this goal and to help countries stay on track. In 2013, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched two programs to support FP2020 data needs, which to date have totaled a $55 million investment. Four years later, in 2017, they wanted to take stock of how these programs were doing.
The RAND team’s evaluation of PMA2020 and Track20 indicates that they have both made substantial contributions. The evaluation points to opportunities for improvement in four main areas:

- data system maturity
- data use
- country ownership
- sustainability.

The RAND team’s evaluation yielded six key findings.

1. **High-quality data are necessary but not sufficient.** Having good data does not necessarily mean that they are going to be well understood and used to inform action. Most of these countries have an abundance of family planning data, but many important stakeholders do not understand what the data are telling them and, therefore, do not understand what to do with them.

2. **A few highly qualified people are also necessary but not sufficient.** It is not enough for these two programs to build the capacity of just a handful of people to generate, manage, analyze, and/or use data. Small numbers of people, however well qualified, cannot meet staffing needs at all levels of government involved in family planning. Stakeholders across the 15 countries called for capacity-building to provide larger numbers of well-qualified data professionals at both the national and subnational levels.
3. Data systems should meet country policymakers’ needs and be sustainable. The right people (at all levels) must be able to get the information they need when they need it for their purposes. The information should be at the right level of detail to inform national-level resource planning and state/provincial and local-level program management—depending on the needs of the decisionmaker.

4. Assessment of data system maturity and sustainability can inform specific improvements. RAND researchers developed and applied two novel frameworks for this evaluation. The data maturity framework included factors in the areas of organizational readiness, data systems, and data use; the sustainability framework included sustainability-enabling factors related to financial, technical, and operational sustainability and data culture. Stakeholder ratings of these factors placed the 15 countries in the middle range for both data system maturity and sustainability. The research team’s findings point to specific strengths and weaknesses in each country. These frameworks could be applied to monitor progress in each country over time.

5. While traditional development support has been top-down, country ownership is a foundation for mature, sustainable data systems. Country stakeholders indicated that they would like greater ownership of family planning data planning, collection, management, analysis, and dissemination processes.

6. Changing data culture requires deliberate planning, effort, and time, and progress should be measured along the way. Explicit attention to this normative change will bring about enduring improvements in data use, data maturity, and sustainability-enabling factors.
Data-Driven Accountability Cycle

New data needs are realized and requested

Data

DEMAND

Complex numerical data, in the form of tables and graphs, are generated

Quality DATA

An interpretation of the data facilitates understanding of the main takeaways

DATA USE BY GOVERNMENTS

Understanding Information

The information is used to help focus on what needs to be done

Actionable MESSAGE

Targeted plans are developed, and programs are improved

ACTION (policy or program)

Recommendations

Promote country-driven agendas. Fostering country ownership increases stakeholder buy-in and the prospects for sustainability.

Intensify focus on data use. As depicted in the figure above showing the data-driven accountability cycle, high-quality data must be translated into understandable information for decisionmakers, who then need actionable messages that can inform their decisions, from program planning and management to policy development. Data-driven action then creates more demand for high-quality data, and the cycle continues.

Plan for and measure progress toward data system maturity and sustainability. These improvements do not happen on their own. They must be addressed explicitly.

Build the ranks—institutionalize the development of data capacity. Train more people at all levels in the generation, analysis, and use of data for action. The RAND team recommended establishment of a permanent country capacity-building program for on-the-job training: Data for Action Training Activity—Family Planning (DATA-FP).