

# Insights from IMCHA's research and policy engagement work in Tanzania

Dena Lomofsky  
Carolina Kern

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**IMPROVING MATERNAL**, newborn, and child health (MNCH) outcomes is a major priority for both country- and global-level actors, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where sustaining and consolidating gains remains critical. A focus on improving health systems – by ensuring they are accessible, responsive, and resilient to shocks – is seen as the best way to achieve this with the agenda for sustainable development and the Universal Health Coverage initiative (UHC2030) putting energy and resources behind these efforts.

The Innovating for Maternal and Child Health in Africa (IMCHA) initiative was established to support these efforts. Funded by Global Affairs Canada, the Canadian Institute of Health Research, and Canada's International Development Research Centre, it tackles health systems issues by focusing on ensuring that research is designed, presented, and packaged in a way that makes it likely to influence policy. Between 2014-2022, the initiative was implemented in 11 countries across Sub-Saharan Africa, with Tanzania hosting the largest number of projects by a large margin.

Given the significant research investment made in Tanzania, where 10 projects were implemented across seven regions, the IMCHA initiative was keen to determine what, if any, value was achieved from having multiple research projects in one country. Southern Hemisphere was chosen to develop a detailed case study in this regard drawing on document reviews and interviews with relevant stakeholders, as well as lessons learned from its relatively recent evaluation of the initiative's work across eastern and southern Africa.

The case study found that having multiple research teams and projects working on MNCH issues in one country over the same period was

valuable particularly in terms of encouraging policy uptake and scaling (see Figure 1).

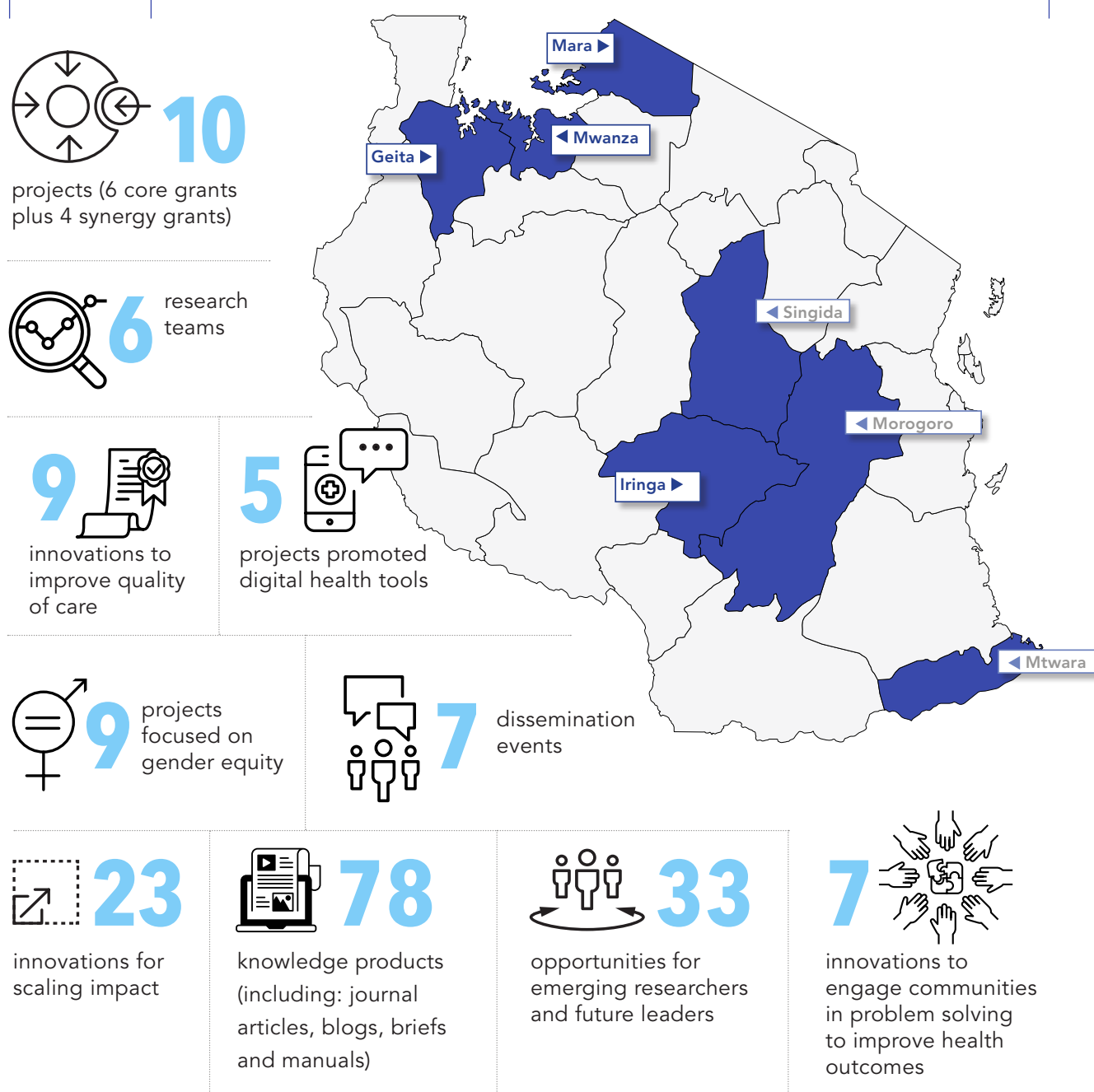
All projects achieved positive results by designing and testing a range of innovations. What is more, 23 innovations were found to have potential for scale up beyond their initial target area with most research projects having at least two innovations leading to positive outcomes. This demonstrates that work supported under the initiative resulted in many potential pathways for future impact.

The design of the IMCHA initiative was a critical part of this success, which prioritized knowledge translation and research uptake as key objectives in all projects. Specifically, it insisted on the use of 'implementation research' – an approach that puts heavy emphasis on testing innovations in real-life settings. It also encouraged uptake by embedding decisionmakers in research teams. As a complement to this, the initiative supported the East Africa Health Policy and Research Organization (EAHPRO) – a consortium of three organizations that played a coordinating role throughout – to facilitate mutual learning, build national-level ownership of research, integrate a gender and health equity lens into projects, and provide training and support to improve knowledge translation and encourage its uptake in policy and practice. The fact that improving MNCH outcomes was a major political priority in Tanzania created an important window of opportunity as well.

The case study identified three benefits of having multiple teams working in one country, which stemmed from the initiative's conscious efforts to coordinate researchers and create the conditions for cooperation. These are summarized in the subsequent section.

Figure 1

# Snapshot of the IMCHA initiative's work in Tanzania



## 1. Built a network of committed actors focused on MNCH

Six research teams implemented the ten projects in the country. This provided scope for cooperation, learning and sharing between

teams, which in turn created a network of actors with a common vision. Research teams interacted throughout the lifespan of their projects in several ways, including during training or coordination meetings and exchange visits, as well as national and international

dissemination events. This allowed researchers to share key aspects of their work and discuss any implementation challenges they were facing. It also provided the opportunity to think collectively about how to get research results into policy and to plan for engagement with decisionmakers.

## 2. Built strong evidence of effective interventions

The volume of research supported in Tanzania tangibly built the MNCH field. The different projects cut across all of the IMCHA initiative's priority themes – namely, community-based interventions; quality of care; enabling the policy environment to improve healthcare services and outcomes; and human resources for health. In addition, there was a nice geographical spread to the projects, which would not have been possible if there were only one or two teams implementing

in the country. This helped develop a strong evidence base for effective interventions, and also ensured that decisionmakers 'paid attention' to research findings.

## 3. Created demand for research by convening a bigger group of decisionmakers

Several national stakeholder engagement events brought researchers together with decisionmakers from the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare and the President's Office for Regional Administration and Local Government, among others. Having multiple teams presenting at these national platforms generated interest in specific studies and helped researchers establish contacts and relationships to amplify their evidence, contributing to increased buy-in and uptake of research results.

### Key Insights

Ultimately, the IMCHA initiative's investment in multiple implementation research studies in Tanzania, coupled with its support of EA-HPRO as a coordinating body, created clear opportunities for connection and sharing.

To encourage greater cross-fertilization on research approaches and methods, as well as specific partnerships between teams, selected 'insights' are highlighted below. These aim to help program designers further optimize this type of investment in future:

- ▶ Encourage greater collaboration by helping research teams to identify points of intersection and take them forward through dedicated funding to
- build joint projects that integrate and scale results. This does not only have to involve research activities, it could also incorporate the producing of knowledge products based on a synthesis of research outputs.
- ▶ Connect research teams with a wider set of relevant stakeholders, such as development partners, who could support with funding, uptake, and scaling.
- ▶ Create opportunities for research teams to visit other research sites more regularly to foster mutual learning and strengthen the overall research network.

### Credits

This insights brief is a summary of a more detailed case study developed for the IMCHA initiative by Southern Hemisphere with input from the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC). Southern Hemisphere's team included Wilma Wessels-Ziervehel, Brilliant Bhebe, Petrpnela Ncube and Shu-aat Davids. Cover image: Courtesy USAID