

Europe raises at least \$32.2M to plug 'global gag rule' shortfall

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NGOs say they are “heartened” by the creation of a Dutch-led fund that aims to replace aid lost for women’s health issues as a result of the U.S. president’s reinstatement of the “global gag rule.” The fund has gained the support of at least nine countries and raised tens of millions of dollars.

But advocates also told Devex there is still a long way to go to make up for the loss of funds triggered by the executive order from the Donald Trump administration, estimated to be at least \$600 million and as much as \$9.5 billion.

Spokespeople for the Belgian and Danish governments confirmed to Devex that they would be contributing 10 million euros (or 75 million krone) each to the She Decides fund, in addition to the 10 million euros already committed by the Dutch — amounting to around \$32 million in total. The fund was [announced](#) by the Dutch Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation Lilianne Ploumen in January as an attempt to replace some of the resources.

Canada, Luxembourg, Sweden, Finland, Estonia and Cape Verde have also pledged political support to the initiative but have not yet stated how much funding they will commit. Lynn Hansel, a spokesperson for the government of Luxembourg, told Devex that there would be “a significant financial contribution” announced in early March.

Trump issued a memorandum in January to revive the Ronald Reagan-era global gag rule — also known as the Mexico City Policy — which prevents non-U.S. NGOs that provide services or information relating to abortion from receiving U.S. government funding for any of their activities.

The policy could result in the loss of the full \$600 million a year that the U.S. Agency for International Development currently provides for family planning. None of that money is used for abortion services but is directed toward other family planning programs such as sex education and contraceptive provision. Since most of the organizations that provide those services also assist with access to safe abortion, they will have their funding withdrawn under the terms of the rule.

The Trump memorandum represents an expansion on previous iterations of the policy in that it applies to all U.S. government global health assistance, whereas previous administrations applied it only to family planning streams. This means that funding for health programs — including HIV prevention, maternal and child health, immunizations and other services offered by the affected organizations — may also be lost.

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Matthew Lindley, a spokesperson for the International Planned Parenthood Federation, the world's largest sexual and reproductive health organization, told Devex that they estimate this could amount to \$9.5 billion in total.

The policy impacts major NGOs, some of which have opted to forfeit U.S. government funding rather than comply with the terms of the order.

IPPF said in a statement that it “will not sign an order that denies human rights and puts the lives of women and girls at risk.” Lindley told Devex that the organization is expecting to lose \$100 million over Trump's first term, of which \$42 million would have been spent on HIV programs.

Megan Elliott, vice president of strategy & development at Marie Stopes International — another major sexual and reproductive health NGO operating in 37 countries — said they will lose around \$30 million a year. Most of that funding would have been spent on mobile clinical outreach teams, providing family planning and basic primary care to women with no access to other services.

Open for donations

Details of the She Decides fund will be announced at a conference and fundraising event in Brussels on March 2, organized jointly by the Dutch, Belgian, Swedish and Danish governments.

For now, the fund is also open to [private donations](#). Huub Bellemakers, a spokesperson for [Rutgers](#) — the Netherlands-based center on reproductive health that has been tasked with coordinating donations — told Devex that a total of 200,000 euros had been given by 2,500 members of the public as of the week beginning Feb. 13.

The overwhelming majority of those donations came from the Netherlands, said Bellemakers, speculating that those outside the country may be donating directly to the organizations affected. Lindley told Devex that online donations to IPPF have surged by 30 times since the announcement of the rule; while Elliott said that MSI has also seen a “measureable increase” in individual donations.

“We would like to express our gratitude for the generosity and support shown by the public,” she said. “Despite the generosity of these donations, there is a significant gap to fill that will need the combined commitment of private philanthropy, other donor governments and national governments.”

She added that the organization is “heartened by the creation of the She Decides initiative.” IPPF said that the response from the international community has been “positive and forceful.” Both organizations said they are working in close collaboration with the governments involved in She Decides.

The government of Australia announced separately that it will give an [extra \\$7.3 million to IPPF](#).

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Marjolein Klaassen, also a spokesperson for Rutgers, told Devex that “it is a work in progress” to determine which organizations would benefit from the fund, but that it will be those organizations “that are most affected by the Mexico City Policy.”

Bellemakers added that decisions are being made in close collaboration with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Organizations will be contacted directly and will not be asked to apply for grants, he said, to avoid further strain on their time and resources.

Political battles

White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer told reporters at a January briefing that Trump is a “pro-life president” who “wants to stand up for all Americans, including the unborn.” He added that the policy “respects taxpayer funding as well.”

But opponents of the policy say it endangers the lives of women and girls around the world, many of whom do not have access to contraceptives and who will be pushed into having unsafe abortions instead. The [World Health Organization](#) says that 47,000 women a year die from unsafe abortions. Opponents also point out that the policy is likely to result in an increase in abortions. The withdrawal of funding from family planning services means that 27 million women and couples around the world will lose access to USAID-funded contraceptives, which currently prevent around 6 million unintended pregnancies and 2.3 million induced abortions each year, according to an estimate from the [Guttmacher Institute](#), a reproductive health research organization.

NGOs argue that access to reproductive services is intrinsically tied to other development issues such as health, poverty and the environment, and that it is essential to recognize the crossover effects of such a policy.