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The Health-related MDGs

The commitment to strengthening health systems has unprecedented urgency as the world moves inextricably toward the deadline to reach the goals and targets of the Millennium Declaration. Clearly, reaching each of the health-related MDGs is vital for their own sake –

contraception to avoid unintended pregnancies, 2) access to skilled care during delivery, and 3) rapid access to quality emergency obstetric care when required. Family planning has an optimal cost effective return, particularly in low-resource settings and when associated with the other two interventions in the 3-pronged approach. It can substantially reduce, by about 15 to 35%, the risk of mortality and morbidity associated with pregnancy and childbirth. Delay in the onset of pregnancies, by keeping girls in school, and through effective contraception once they are sexually active, affects the total number of pregnancies and avoids high risk childbirth. Secondly, skilled attendance at all births by professional midwives at the primary health care level combined with effective referral to facilities in case of complication have been fundamental in most of the countries that have succeeded in reducing maternal mortality and morbidity. But even under the best circumstances, 15% of pregnant women will experience complications, mostly unpredicted, but manageable. The World Bank has estimated that 74% of maternal deaths can be prevented with access to Emergency Obstetric Care. But as effective as these approaches are, safe motherhood programmes should ideally extend beyond health services and mobilize the community to encourage delayed marriage and childbearing, increase access of girls and young women to education and socio-economic opportunities, improve women's status thereby removing barriers to accessing health and social services, eliminate violence against women, and engage men and boys in these processes.

Linking HIV services with sexual and reproductive health services generates important public health benefits. A recent review of the evidence concluded that linkages improved access to and uptake of services, including HIV counseling and testing, health and behavioural outcomes, condom use, knowledge and the overall quality of the linked services. One of the pillars of sexual and reproductive health a

Reproductive rights, enshrined in the ICPD Programme of Action, are a cornerstone in building sustainable development and attaining the MDGs. But gender dynamics resulting in power imbalances between men/boys and women/girls have taken their toll. One in three women

vicious circle (ill-health-poverty-ill-health) or can further hinder attempts to move out of poverty.

Universal access to reproductive health – a window of opportunity

With the target date for achieving the MDGs fast approaching, intensified efforts to strengthen health systems are imperative. Because there are significant synergies both within the health MDGs and with other MDGs, particularly those addressing poverty and gender equality, the potential for positive impact is magnified. Improvements in health systems, particularly for sexual and reproductive health, are a worthy investment to contribute to the human rights-based development agenda.