

Commentary

Family planning: the essential link to achieving all eight Millennium Development Goals

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The International Conference on Family Planning, held in Kampala, Uganda, from November 15–18, 2009, drew over 1300 family planning researchers, program managers and health ministry officials from across the globe. This conference marked the reinvigoration of a global commitment to family planning.

Why such renewed emphasis on family planning after 15 years of relative quiet? Perhaps it is because as 2015 approaches, we realize we are not on target to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) [1]. Perhaps we have also finally understood that family planning may indeed be one of the most cost-effective development investments [2].

Here is my opinion on why family planning is crucial to achieving the MDGs:

- End poverty and hunger — Family planning generates wealth. For example, the per capita Gross National Product is correlated with the prevalence of modern contraceptive methods [3]. Moreover, family planning also reduces the aggregate demand for increasing scarce food products. In 1997, 775 million people were categorized as undernourished, and the world grain stocks were 108 days. By 2017, an estimated 1.2 billion people will be undernourished, and the world grain stocks are projected to run out [4].
- Universal education — Family planning prolongs education. Unintended pregnancy is a major obstacle to school attendance, since many youth drop out of school once pregnancies occur. Less than half of all African girls complete primary school [5]. And by age 18, nearly half of women 18 years of age or younger in such countries as Malawi and Bangladesh have children or are currently pregnant [5].
- Gender equality — Family planning empowers women. Unplanned pregnancies interrupt work and career plans. In Egypt, women who use contraception are more likely to be employed than nonusers [3]. In Brazil and Indonesia, use of long-acting or permanent contraceptive methods was associated with a greater likelihood of working for pay [3]. The recent book by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky* [6], documents that empowering women, including their ability to achieve desired family size, is the most important driver of modern development efforts.
- Child health — Family planning saves infant lives. Spacing planned births and limiting unintended births increases child survival [7]. Currently, 1.2 million infant deaths are averted globally each year by preventing unintended pregnancies [8]. Another 640,000 newborn deaths would be prevented if we could meet unmet contraceptive needs.
- Maternal health — Family planning improves maternal health. Unintended pregnancy affects a woman's health in several ways: if she seeks to terminate that pregnancy, the risks of unsafe abortion are among the main causes of maternal death in young women [9]. If she wishes to continue the pregnancy, in low-resource settings without safe delivery services, the risks of maternal mortality are high. By preventing unintended pregnancy, wider family planning access reduces the risk of abortion or childbearing.
- Combat HIV/AIDS — Family planning prevents HIV [10]. Contraception is the best kept secret in HIV prevention. Women with HIV who have unintended pregnancies run the risk of transmitting the virus to their child. Preventing pregnancies among HIV-positive women who do not wish to become pregnant reduces HIV-positive births and the number of

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children needing HIV treatment, care and support [11,12]. Three times as many infants are spared HIV infection by current contraceptive use compared to providing antiretroviral treatment to mothers during pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding [13].

- Environmental sustainability – Family planning protects the environment [14]. Environmental degradation is fueled by (1) per capita consumption, (2) the technology used to produce what is consumed and (3) population growth. Preventing unintended pregnancy is the factor in population growth most amenable to intervention. Many women want fewer children, and 217 million have unmet needs for contraception [8]. Moreover, family planning is environmentally cost-efficient. Family planning is five times cheaper than conventional green technologies for reducing CO₂ climate change [13].
- Global partnerships – Family planning promotes global partnerships. Four decades of global investment in family planning programs has contributed to strong collaboration among international agencies, governmental ministries, multinational organizations and local community groups. The current move towards strengthening health services has been founded on linkages between family planning and HIV services [15].

Beyond the MDGs, family planning has a direct influence on improving lives worldwide in two other ways:

- Enhanced national security – Family planning stabilizes society. Expert groups have concluded that high birth rates in many areas of the world have produced a steadily increasing population of young men without any reasonable expectation of suitable or steady employment [16]. The “youth bulge” undermines national transition to liberal democracies [17]. These become a source for social turbulence.
- Optimize financial resources – Family planning saves dollars. Preventing unintended pregnancy is less expensive than treating maternal/infant complications of pregnancy. In Zambia, for every \$1 invested in family planning, \$4 are saved in other development areas [18].

A crescendo is building to support the essential role of, and the necessary resources for, family planning as a foundation for addressing global health and development [19]. While family planning will not solve all our problems, it is, however, a highly effective cross-cutting development imperative that can help us reach the MDGs. Achieving universal access to family planning is within our grasp, but we need to increase investment in contraceptive technology research, develop more evidenced-based policies, engage the public and private sectors, and expand the local commitment to family planning worldwide.

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