

Global forum calls for urgent action to curb health inequities, cut maternal and child mortality

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More than 800 leaders and public health experts from around the world opened a landmark two-day meeting in Johannesburg to review new data and call for accelerated action to improve maternal, newborn and child health. The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health (PMNCH) 2014 Partners' Forum was opened by Graça Machel, Chair of PMNCH and African Ambassador for Committing to Child Survival: A Promise Renewed, who is making her first public appearance since the end of her mourning period after the death of her husband, Nelson Mandela.

"The world has made remarkable progress to improve [health](#) and expand opportunities over the past 14 years. Despite all efforts, there is still much more to be done," said Graça Machel. "Women and children have not been covered adequately. We must ensure that all women, adolescent girls, children and newborns, no matter where they live, are able to fulfill their rights to health and education, and realize their full potential."

In support of the UN Secretary-General's Every Woman Every Child movement, the Partners' Forum builds on two months of high-level meetings in Toronto, Prague, and Washington, DC, where global leaders and health experts met to discuss strategies to promote the health of women and children. At this Forum, leaders discussed steps to assist countries that have lagged behind in efforts to improve reproductive, maternal, newborn and [child health](#), and made specific recommendations

for how to maintain the focus on women and children within the post-2015 development agenda. Notably, participants also pledged their financial and policy support and a range of new resources to support the implementation of the new Every Newborn action plan (ENAP), a roadmap to improve newborn health and prevent stillbirths by 2035.

"We are privileged as a country to host this important meeting about the urgent need to improve women's and children's health. This global gathering gives us the opportunity to learn from each other's successes and challenges, and to identify new approaches," said Dr. Aaron Motsoaledi, South African Health Minister. The Government of South Africa is a Forum co-host, together with PMNCH, Countdown to 2015, A Promise Renewed and the independent Expert Review Group.

Despite improvements, 289,000 women still die every year from complications at birth and 6.6 million children do not live to see their fifth birthday, including nearly 3 million newborns. At least 200 million women and girls are unable to access family planning services that would allow them to control when they have children.

The world has been especially slow in improving health outcomes for newborns. Globally, each year, 2.9 million newborns (first 28 days of life) die and 2.6 million are stillborn (die in the last three months of pregnancy or during childbirth). Recent data published in The Lancet Every Newborn Series indicate that 15,000 babies are born and die every day without ever receiving a birth or death certificate. The accompanying analysis found that 3 million maternal and newborn deaths and stillbirths in 75 high burden countries could be prevented each year with proven interventions that can be implemented for an annual cost of only US\$1.15 per person.

Responding to this crisis, partners at the Forum launched the ENAP, endorsed by the World Health Assembly in May 2014. The action plan is

based on concrete evidence to further reduce preventable newborn deaths and stillbirths. Signalling their support for the full and prompt implementation of the plan, Forum attendees announced 40 new commitments. These commitments are in support of the UN Secretary-General's Every Woman Every Child movement and come from a diverse group of stakeholders, including governments, civil society organizations and the private sector.

"There is absolutely no reason for so many newborns to die every year when their lives can be saved with simple, cost-effective solutions," said Dr. Flavia Bustreo, Assistant Director-General for Family, Women's and Community Health at the World Health Organization. "The WHO remains committed to support countries and work with partners as the plan gets implemented, and to the accountability agenda, which includes reporting on progress achieved every year until 2030."

New data is critical to inform discussions about changing this reality. Today, partners at the Forum released the Countdown to 2015 Report for 2014, which presents the latest assessment of progress in the 75 countries that account for 95 percent of all maternal and child deaths each year. The report finds that in several countries, more than half of the mothers and children in the poorest 20 percent of the population still receive two or fewer of the eight interventions deemed essential for preventing or treating common causes of maternal and child death, including vaccinations, skilled birth attendance, pneumonia and diarrhea treatment, and access to family planning. The analysis shows that, in these 75 countries, a median of 39 percent of deaths of children under age five occur during the first month of life, underscoring a need for improved access to quality skilled delivery care for mother and baby around the time of birth, when most stillbirths and maternal and newborn deaths occur.

"We have affordable interventions that we know work. There's no

excuse for not bringing them to the women and children who need them," said Dr. Mickey Chopra, Chief of Health at UNICEF and co-Chair of Countdown to 2015. "The health and well-being of our next generation, and the right of millions of children to live happy, productive lives, is at stake."

One other report was also launched at the 2014 PMNCH Partners' Forum: Success Factors for Women's and Children's Health Report spotlights 10 "fast track" countries making considerable progress in reducing maternal and child deaths, showing that rapid progress is possible despite significant social and economic challenges. The report showed the benefits of investing in high-impact interventions such as skilled care at birth, immunization, and family planning.

Delegates at the Forum emphasized the importance of ensuring that future efforts focus on countries that are making slow progress, and on poor and marginalized populations, including newborns and adolescents. Delegates also urged political [leaders](#) to work across different sectors—including education, skills and employment, water supply and sanitation, nutrition, energy, roads, and women's empowerment—to ensure an integrated approach to improving the health of women and children.

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