

HQ/2008/17

New UNFPA-Supported Initiative Expands Midwives' Efforts to Save Women and Newborns

New York, 22 September 2008—UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, and the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) have launched a new initiative to tackle the severe lack of midwives in developing countries.

Every year half a million women die in pregnancy or childbirth and 10-15 million women suffer serious or long-lasting illnesses or injuries. In addition, three million newborns die during the first week of life and another three million are stillborn. Many of these deaths and disabilities could be prevented if all births were attended by midwives.

“By investing in midwives and universal access to reproductive health, millions of lives can be saved and we can reach Millennium Development Goal 5, to improve maternal health,” said UNFPA Executive Director Thoraya Ahmed Obaid.

There is a need for an additional 334,000 midwives, according to the World Health Organization. It is estimated that skilled attendance at delivery, backed up by emergency obstetric care, could reduce the number of women dying in pregnancy and childbirth by about 75 per cent.

The new UNFPA-ICM midwifery programme will increase the number of births attended by professional midwifery providers and develop the foundations for a sustainable midwifery workforce in selected developing countries. Its focus will be on training midwives and strengthening midwifery education, developing practice standards, and developing and strengthening national midwifery associations.

“We need some strong advocates who can call on governments to invest in much needed midwives,” said ICM President Bridget Lynch. “But we also need to work with governments to ensure the scaling up and quality of midwifery services. They need to take ownership.”

The \$9-million initiative will start in 11 of the hardest-hit countries with the highest levels of maternal deaths and disability and the lowest rates of births attended by skilled workers—Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar, Sudan, Uganda and Zambia. It will then expand to include 30 countries and—if funding permits—even more.

The three-year project is funded by the Netherlands and Sweden and will be implemented by ICM and UNFPA offices in the selected countries.

Related links:

UNFPA: Stepping up to save women's lives: <http://www.unfpa.org/mothers/index.htm>

Media kit and factsheets on maternal health: <http://www.unfpa.org/safemotherhood/mediakit/>

ICM – the International Confederation of Midwives: <http://www.internationalmidwives.org/>

UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is an international development agency that promotes the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity. UNFPA supports countries in using population data for policies and programmes to reduce poverty and to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, every young person is free of HIV/AIDS, and every girl and woman is treated with dignity and respect.

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