

United Nations Country Team Viet Nam



Statement

by Mr. Bruce Campbell, UNFPA Representative
and United Nations Resident Coordinator a/i

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Event: Press Conference on the World Population Day 2009

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I am very honoured to be here representing the UN in Viet Nam at this press conference to commemorate World Population Day 2009, together with Vice Minister Thuy. I would like to thank the Ministry of Health for their continued support of the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action in Viet Nam and for organizing this press conference today.

We value the important key role played by the media in advocating for reproductive rights, women's health and gender equality, and we look forward to answering your questions relating to the theme of this year's World Population Day: "Responding to the economic crisis: Investing in women is a smart choice".

We all know that the global economic crisis is hitting developing countries hard. It threatens to push 200 million people in the world back into poverty, and experience has shown that women and girls suffer disproportionately during times of crisis such as this. To protect their rights, we are here today to call for continued investment in women and renewed efforts to ensure progress towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Every year, the world loses USD 15 billion in productivity because half a million women die in pregnancy and childbirth, and four million newborns do not survive. And yet it is estimated to cost only USD 6 billion to provide the health services needed to save these lives. Most maternal and neonatal deaths can be prevented through universal access to reproductive health care services. For this to happen, health systems need to be strengthened to provide family planning, skilled attendance at birth and emergency obstetric care. These measures, if implemented comprehensively in Viet Nam, would not only save thousands of lives, but also would improve the nation's productivity.

In fact, progress has been made in expanding access to reproductive health and in integrating family planning and pre and post natal care and HIV prevention in Viet Nam, thanks to the vision and of the government and collective efforts together with development partners. Furthermore, the implementation of the Population Strategy (2001-2010), the National Reproductive Health Strategy (2001-2010), the National Safe Motherhood Master Plan (2003-2010) and the free health care policy for children under the age of six have demonstrated the strong commitment by the Government of Viet Nam to improving maternal and child health.

The UN in Viet Nam has supported the Ministry of Health in a variety of ways, including strengthening access to, and quality of, emergency obstetric and newborn care; building the capacity of skilled birth attendants and ethnic midwives; enhancing health education for safe delivery and community-based referral system for emergencies; and preventing HIV transmission while increasing women's access to HIV prevention and treatment.

At the same time, the Government reported in 2008 that the maternal mortality ratio reached 75 deaths per 100,000 live births in Viet Nam. However, the maternal mortality ratio in Viet Nam varies between the river deltas and mountainous areas with higher ratios in remote ethnic minority areas. In order to reach the Millennium Development target of a 75% reduction in the maternal mortality ratio by 2015, a lot more needs to be done.

Together, we need to foster much greater progress in the areas of women's empowerment and gender equality. We also need to pay much greater attention to women's health, and expand our investments in efforts to reduce maternal mortality.

Research has shown that investment to scale up basic health services can bring a six-fold economic return. For example, in Ghana, Tanzania and Uganda, studies indicate that each dollar invested in contraceptive services can save up to four dollars in expenditures on antenatal, maternal and newborn health care¹. These impressive numbers prove that investments in education and health for women and girls are linked to increases in productivity, agricultural yields, and national income. There is no smarter investment, with such high economic and social returns, than investing in the health and education rights of adolescent girls and women.

I also want to emphasize that MDG5 on maternal health is recognized to be at the heart of all eight Millennium Development Goals. If we don't reduce tragic and unnecessary maternal deaths and guarantee access to reproductive health, we will not achieve the other MDGs.

To maintain the momentum toward achieving MDG5, three things are needed. First, resources must continue to be devoted to enhancing the quality of safe motherhood services for ethnic minority people in remote and mountainous areas. We need to pay special attention to ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups. We need data, robust monitoring and evaluation. And we need better coordination and harmonization between partners to increase efficiency gains and maximize the impact of our investments.

Secondly, it is essential we strengthen and improve the knowledge, skills and attitudes among service providers of maternal health and newborn care. The priority should be on skilled attendance at delivery with a strengthened referral system to a centre which can provide comprehensive care, including emergency obstetric and new born care. With universal access to these critical reproductive health services, maternal death and disability could be reduced dramatically.

Thirdly, to save women's lives, we need strong leadership at all levels. We need increased spending for women's health in national budgets, and where gaps are identified, we need increased international development assistance. We know from other countries' experiences from previous crises that decreased investments in health took longer and required more resources to get back to the pre-crisis level of health standards. We cannot allow this to happen in Viet Nam.

Today, on the occasion of the World Population Day, we need to translate our commitment to support health and equal opportunity for all people into action. It is time to make health and reproductive rights a priority for all, especially for women. And finally, I would like to ask each and every one of you, as professional journalists who are attending this press conference, to assist in disseminating the key messages of the WPD 2009 as widely as possible to policy makers and implementers at all levels.

Thank you very much for your attention and participation and I am looking forward to hearing your questions.

¹ Secretary-General's Forum on Advancing Global Health in the Face of Crisis June 2009