



**REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR AFRICA**

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**REPORT OF THE PANEL DISCUSSION**

**The role of the community in improving maternal,  
newborn and child health in the WHO African Region**

**Background**

1. In Africa, most of the causes of maternal, newborn and under-five deaths can be prevented with the existing cost-effective interventions. However, ensuring universal access and utilization of the key interventions remains a challenge. Mothers and children continue to die due to the triple delays in *seeking* appropriate care, *reaching* the health facility and *receiving* the appropriate management at the facility.
2. Lessons from maternal, newborn and child health (MNCH) services show that community empowerment, participation and ownership of community-based interventions are essential for increasing utilization and access to services. This calls for the involvement of the community in the planning, implementation and monitoring of community-based health services.
3. Community-based interventions for increasing access to MNCH services are a major component of the “Road map for accelerating the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals related to maternal and newborn health”. The road map was adopted by Resolution AFR/RC54/R9 as the regional strategy for reducing maternal and newborn morbidity and mortality. The regional child survival strategy was proposed by Resolution AFR/RC56/R/5.
4. Cognizant of the need to strengthen community-based MNCH services, the WHO Regional Committee for Africa organized a panel discussion on the role of the community in improving maternal, newborn and child health in the WHO African Region during the fifty-seventh session of the Regional Committee.

## **Objectives**

5. The general objective of the panel discussion was to share experiences and lessons learnt in addressing the challenges in the improvement of MNCH through community action. The specific objectives were:

- (a) to identify key community-level actions to ensure timely access and utilization of MNCH services;
- (b) to identify opportunities and mechanisms for accelerated implementation of cost-effective community actions for MNCH;
- (c) to make recommendations to Member States on the way forward for improving MNCH through community actions.

## **Proceedings**

6. Professor Sheila Diaotshe Tlou, Minister of Health of Botswana, chaired the session, and four experts made presentations on strengthening interaction and linkages between health facilities and communities; overcoming traditions, cultures and beliefs in improving MNCH at community level; and contributions of the private sector at community level; and birth preparedness.

7. At the end of the presentations, the participants raised pertinent questions and comments related to the role of the community in improving maternal, newborn and child health in the African Region. The following key points were raised:

- (a) Cultural and traditional issues related to antenatal care, delivery and postnatal care have impacted on community perception and utilization of health services. The health system therefore needs to pay more attention to sociocultural considerations in addressing community needs to improve MNCH.
- (b) The access of communities to affordability and acceptability of MNCH services remains a challenge in the Region.
- (c) Financing of MNCH services at community level is inadequate and often depends on external resources. Consequently, the sustainability of community-based programmes is threatened by such inadequacy of domestic resources.
- (d) Nongovernmental organizations working through government structures can play a major role in advocacy and implementation of MNCH programmes through capacity building, including institutional strengthening.
- (e) While community-based interventions are a key for the improvement of MNCH, a strong linkage with a functional health system is essential for sustainability and better health outcomes.
- (f) Failure to scale up successful community initiatives will prevent the desired impact on improving MNCH outcomes.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were agreed upon:

- (a) There is a need to promote research for better understanding of the sociocultural context and to take appropriate measures to improve MNCH.
- (b) Community health services and training should be formalized and institutionalized in order to ensure sustainability.
- (c) Member States should invest more resources in MNCH to ensure sustainable socio-economic development. This should also include channelling of more domestic resources to community level interventions to ensure better outcomes.
- (d) Partnerships at national and global levels should be strengthened to ensure adequate resources for MNCH.
- (e) To ensure a comprehensive approach to maternal and child health, WHO should organize discussions on sexual and reproductive health during future Regional Committee or World Health Assembly meetings.