

Giving the world's poorest women the power to plan their families

Bob Carr, Melinda French Gates, Andrew Mitchell, and Rajiv Shah

Millions of girls and women in the world's poorest countries can transform their lives if needs for family planning—to delay, space, and limit the number of children that women have—are met. Across the developing world some 222 million women who want to avoid pregnancy are not using a modern method of contraception.¹ Despite progress in some areas of the world, this situation has changed little in the past decade.²

The results of providing women with universal access to voluntary family planning are dramatic and wide-ranging. The health benefits would include nearly 590 000 fewer newborn deaths and 94 000 fewer maternal deaths every year (Susheela Singh, Guttmacher Institute, personal communication).³ Unintended pregnancies would drop by 71%, resulting in 22 million fewer unplanned births and 24 million fewer induced abortions.¹

Beyond health, there are many far-reaching, transformational effects of women being able to take control of their fertility. At the household level, families are able to invest more of their scarce resources in the health and education of their children. Girls from smaller families are more likely to complete their education and women with fewer children are more able to seek employment, increasing household income and assets.^{4,5}

Falling birth rates also bring the potential for a “demographic dividend”, by increasing the ratio of working adults to dependents.⁶ Countries, including South Korea and Thailand, have capitalised on this window of opportunity for economic growth by investing in the health, education, and welfare of their citizens. And now, with the right investments and policies, countries across the developing world, including massive economies such as India and Indonesia, stand poised to benefit too—transforming the lives of their people and bolstering the global economy.⁷

It is deplorable that millions of women and men in the world's poorest countries continue to lack access

to quality family planning information, services, and supplies so that they are unable to choose whether, when, and how many children to have. Decades of research incontrovertibly show that family planning saves lives by reducing the number of high-risk pregnancies and reducing recourse to unsafe abortion. The persistent unmet need for family planning contributes to what the United Nations has termed “inadequate progress” towards reducing child mortality and improving maternal health⁸—Millennium Development Goals (MDG) 4 and 5.⁹

Family planning is recognised as a highly cost-effective development intervention to promote healthy families, increase opportunities for economic development, and enable strong and vibrant nations. At a time when value-for-money and cost-effectiveness are the watchwords for development agencies, it is critical that the global community commit to long-term investments in voluntary family planning to meet health and other development goals. The UN recognises that “for every dollar spent in family planning, between US\$2 and US\$6 can be saved in interventions aimed at achieving other development goals”¹⁰ yet global investments have not kept pace with increasing demand.

In July, 2012, the UK Government and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, with UNFPA and others, will bring together governments, civil society, and the private sector at a summit on family planning in London. In line

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About the authors:

Bob Carr is the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Melinda French Gates is the Co-Chair and Trustee of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Andrew Mitchell is the United Kingdom Secretary of State for International Development.

Rajiv Shah is the Administrator for the United States Agency for International Development.



with the UN Secretary-General's Every Woman, Every Child initiative,¹¹ the summit aims to ensure that women in the world's poorest countries have the same access to lifesaving contraceptives as women in high-income countries. The summit will raise the profile of family planning, celebrate successes, identify and address barriers, and generate financing, policy, and service delivery solutions and commitments. It will launch a global movement to enable an additional 120 million women in the world's poorest countries to access family planning information, services, and supplies by 2020.

The London summit is just one of the ways we are keeping our collective commitment to improve the health of women and children. The Alliance between our four development organisations—Australian Government Overseas Aid Program (AusAID), the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—reflects a fundamental belief that achieving MDGs 4 and 5 requires coordinated international action to overcome longstanding challenges in reproductive, maternal, and newborn health. When we launched the Alliance in September, 2010, at the UN General Assembly, we committed to increasing the number of women with access to modern methods of family planning in low-income countries. Recognising the substantial impact that birth spacing can have on reducing child deaths, the summit will also build upon the commitments made at the June, 2012, Child Survival Call to Action. Convened by the Governments of the USA, India, and Ethiopia in coordination with UNICEF, the Call to Action seeks to identify the smartest investments towards the goal of eliminating preventable child deaths in a generation.

Leaders across the world are now publicly committing to expand access to family planning. To achieve this, we need to overcome endemic obstacles in many health systems, including lack of contraceptive supplies, financial barriers, the way the delivery of family planning is medicalised, human-resource constraints, and low-quality services. We also need to address individual-level barriers that undermine women's ability to access contraceptives, including limited knowledge of methods, fears about side-effects, and the disinterest, if not opposition, from partners.⁴

Such countries as Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Rwanda are showing that strong political commitment, sound policies, and cost-effective investments in health

systems can dramatically increase access to family planning. We need to learn from these and other successes. The private sector also has a critical role in ensuring adequate and sustainable global family planning supplies and pricing structures; in many countries, private providers account for an increasing share of family planning services.¹²

We are committed to supporting governments from developing countries their efforts to ensure universal access to voluntary family planning. Investments in family planning are critical for promoting health, welfare, economic growth, and development across the globe, and ultimately for ensuring that all individuals and families are empowered to freely determine the number and spacing of their children. We call on others to join us in these efforts to transform lives today and for generations to come.

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For more information

London Summit on Family Planning

<http://www.dfid.gov.uk/News/Latest-news/2012/Family-planning-UK-to-host-summit-with-Gates-Foundation>

Child Survival Call to Action

http://transition.usaid.gov/our_work/global_health/pop/alliance.html

The Alliance for Reproductive, Maternal, and Newborn Health

<http://5thday.usaid.gov/pages/ResponseSub/Event.aspx>

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