

UN Millennium Project Report “Public Choices, Private Decisions: Sexual and Reproductive Health and the Millennium Development Goals”

What is sexual and reproductive health?

Sexual and reproductive health include issues such as access to family planning services, including contraceptives; safe motherhood; prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS; gender violence, including female genital mutilation; and empowerment of women. At the core of the concept is the promotion of healthy, voluntary and safe sexual and reproductive choices for individuals and couples, including such decisions as those on family size and timing of marriage.

The International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 defined reproductive rights as “...the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. It also includes their right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence”. This right was originally defined in 1968 in Tehran at the International Conference on Human Rights as: “Parents have a basic human right to determine freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children”.

Why is the UN Millennium Project devoting a separate report to sexual and reproductive health?

The Millennium Project recognizes that the Millennium Development Goals will not be attained without progress on voluntary family planning, women’s empowerment, safe motherhood and action against sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS) and gender violence.

Sexual and reproductive health issues are divided among the various Millennium Development Goals, diluting their collective recognition, but essential to most of them, including poverty reduction. The progress of poor countries and of the poorest segments of countries towards sustainable development depends on the attainment of access to quality reproductive health services.

This report is a clear presentation to the larger development community and national decision makers of the issues of sexual and reproductive health. It explains the international consensus on the issues, the clear linkages between sexual and reproductive health and the Millennium Development Goals, and the impacts that progress will have on the Goals.

What are the key messages of the report?

- Access to family planning; safe pregnancy and delivery; and freedom from sexual violence and infections (including HIV/AIDS) are basic rights by international consensus. But the needs of the poor are not being met. Action to provide these services to all prevents death and disability, spurs development and fights poverty.
- Investments in sexual and reproductive health are vital to achieving the Millennium Development Goals, and must be included in national development strategies. The world’s leaders agreed that access to reproductive health reduces poverty and promotes human development. Governments, civil society, private sector, communities and individuals need to act now.

- Large youthful populations in developing countries are both a challenge and an opportunity for national development. Providing young people with access to reproductive health information and services tailored to their particular needs can ensure healthier and longer lives and spur economic and social development.
- Involving men in sexual and reproductive health as clients, partners and agents of social change is crucial to promoting healthier lives for women and girls, gender equality and the health of men themselves.

What is the current investment in sexual and reproductive health and how much is needed?

Population assistance, covering family planning; reproductive health; sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS; and basic research, data and population and development analysis, has increased since the first resource estimates were developed in 1994 as a response to the International Conference on Population and Development. The increase in resources is mainly due to larger attention to HIV/AIDS while funding for both family planning and reproductive health has decreased. The share of family planning within total population assistance has dropped by 80% between 1995 and 2003.

The report provides new resource estimates and demonstrates that resource requirements for the basic sexual and reproductive health package will be significantly higher than estimated over a decade ago. By 2015 the required annual costs will be about US\$14 billion more than originally anticipated, reaching US\$36 billion.

How will the recommendations in this report be put into action?

This report should motivate national decision makers to incorporate sexual and reproductive health programs in their national development plans. Quality programs are a matter of basic rights and cost-effective contributors to health and poverty reduction. The integration of sexual and reproductive health, including family planning, into health system improvement programs will save lives, save money and energize community participation and support.

What role can civil society play in sexual and reproductive health and the Millennium Development Goals?

Civil society participation is essential to ensuring progress towards sexual and reproductive health in particular and the Millennium Development Goals in general. Women's health issues are rarely high on political agendas without it. Strengthening health systems will require feedback from beneficiaries on their needs and priorities. The translation of stated desires to limit or space births into effective programmatic action depends on inputs to the design, implementation and monitoring of sexual and reproductive health programs. The beneficiaries understand their needs and can formulate responses consistent with their community and cultural understandings. Furthermore, civil society plays an important role in contributing to service provision and information in a variety of ways such as peer-to-peer education among adolescents; global partnerships between pharmaceutical companies and national stakeholders; and NGO involvement at the local level.

Who will benefit from these initiatives?

The poorest will benefit the most as they have the highest unmet need for family planning; the highest rates for maternal morbidity and mortality as well as infant mortality; and the highest proportion of people infected with sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS.