



**REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN**

9 October 2014

**Sixty-first Session
Tunis, Tunisia, 19-22 October 2014**

TECHNICAL SESSION

SAVING THE LIVES OF MOTHERS AND CHILDREN

Objectives of the event

The objectives of the event are to:

- highlight progress made in the implementation of the regional initiative on saving the lives of mothers and children in the MDG priority countries and address ways and means to sustain commitment;
- address strategic approaches to reduce maternal and child mortality in countries which may not achieve MDG 4 or 5, especially in countries in emergencies; and
- orient Member States on the post-2015 agenda related to maternal and child health.

Background

Estimates developed by WHO, UNICEF, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Bank and the United Nations Population Division, as well as the UN inter-agency group for child mortality, indicate that 39 000 mothers and 899 000 children under 5 died in the Eastern Mediterranean Region in 2012. Ninety five per cent of this mortality, which was preventable, was due to pregnancy, childbirth and common childhood diseases, including: haemorrhage, eclampsia, infection, diarrhoea and pneumonia. This maternal mortality ratio represents 250 per 100 000 live births and under-5 child mortality 57 per 1000 live births.

As a result, in 2012, maternal and child health was identified as one of WHO's five priority areas. Efforts were scaled up to improve maternal and child health in the Region and the WHO Regional Office embarked on an initiative on saving the lives of mothers and children. The regional initiative was launched by WHO, UNFPA and UNICEF jointly with Member States in a high-level meeting in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, in January 2013. This event was unprecedented and concluded with the Dubai Declaration, in which Member States committed to develop and implement comprehensive maternal and child health acceleration plans. The Declaration was further endorsed by the sixtieth session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean in October 2013 in resolution EM/RC60/R.6. In the resolution, the Committee called on Member States to fulfil their commitments expressed in the Dubai Declaration. It also urged countries with a high burden of maternal and child mortality (Afghanistan, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen) to strengthen multisectoral partnerships in order to implement national acceleration plans, allocate national human and financial resources and mobilize additional resources from donors, partners and development agencies.

Since then, WHO/UNFPA/UNICEF have worked together to support Member States to develop and implement the acceleration plans. The plans in each of the nine countries focus on the most disadvantaged populations with a high burden of maternal and child mortality and low coverage of evidence-based interventions. Technical advisory groups have been established in each of the MDG priority countries to address constraints facing implementation of these plans and coordination mechanisms among all concerned parties are being strengthened, building on existing bodies at the global, regional and country levels.

Progress

By January 2014, all nine countries were implementing their acceleration plans using start-up funds allocated from domestic and donor sources. The Regional Office allocated US\$ 2.6 million to support these efforts, and by September 2014, implementation rates for these funds had reached 99%. All nine countries have identified maternal and child health as priority programmes for the current biennium, and hence, a further US\$ 7 million was made available for 2014–2015 to support continued implementation of the plans. Maternal and child health system-related elements have been strengthened, and technical assessment tools to improve the quality of maternal and child health care and infection control measures have been developed. Gaps in maternal and child health-related human resources, lifesaving medicines and commodities, operations and implementation research, and district health information systems are being addressed.

Member States have demonstrated commitment and political will to support maternal and child health as a priority in national health agendas and progress has been made in implementing the acceleration plans with variant absorption capacity of existing resources.

The UN mortality estimates indicate that in 2013 the number of maternal deaths was 26 000 (a reduction of 13 000 deaths from 2010) and the number of under-5 children deaths 845 000 (a reduction of 54 000 deaths from 2012). In 2013, the maternal mortality ratio reached 170 per 100 000 live births and under-5 child mortality 55 per 1000 live births. The level of maternal mortality in the Eastern Mediterranean Region moved from the second to the third highest among WHO regions, after the African and South East Asia regions.

The Regional Office, in collaboration with partners, has embarked on analysing progress towards MDGs 4 and 5 in Member States. The analysis indicates that seven Member States have achieved low levels of maternal and child mortality, six Member States have already achieved MDG 4 and two have achieved MDG 5. Taking this information into account, five Member States, in addition to the 9 MDG priority countries, should receive further focus on maternal and child health in the remaining period until the end of 2015. Emergencies in several Member States have seriously affected progress already made in these countries and innovative approaches are required to address the health needs of mothers and children. Even in countries with low maternal and child mortality levels, strategic plans are required to sustain achievements made and to implement targeted interventions to further reduce maternal and child mortality, especially neonatal mortality.

WHO will continue to support Member States in the implementation of maternal and child health acceleration plans in close partnership and coordination with UNFPA and UNICEF and key stakeholders to maintain a sustainable commitment and political will to achieve the targets.

Almost a year is remaining to report on country progress in reaching the targets. It is critical to continue efforts and prepare appropriate plans in accordance with the post-2015 development agenda. The commitment and role of Member States are essential in driving the post-2015 agenda debate and addressing priority issues for saving the lives of mothers and children building on the experience already gained in the Region.

Challenges in the Region

The main challenges to progress in the area of maternal and child health have been identified as: inequities in the availability, accessibility and quality of maternal and child health services; shortages of human resources; insufficient financial resources and lack of sustained commitment to maternal and child health; poor quality of care, including infection control, and political instability and insecurity, particularly in countries facing emergencies.

WHO is committed to scaling up support for maternal and child health with special emphasis on the nine priority countries with a high burden of maternal and child morbidity and mortality, and on those remaining countries which require much greater progress to achieve the targets. This support includes: promoting primary health care for maternal and child health to ensure universal coverage; reviewing and strengthening national capacity-building to improve quality of care; documenting and sharing successful interventions and best practices in the Region; and strengthening mechanisms for collaboration and coordination, both internally and externally with UNFPA, UNICEF and other key stakeholders.

Expected outcomes

Member States are urged to maintain a high level of commitment to the regional initiative on saving the lives of mothers and children and address gaps hindering the implementation of maternal and child health acceleration plans. Delegates will be invited to discuss the post-2015 agenda and address priority issues for saving the lives of mothers and children, building on the experience already gained in the Region.