

Regional Preparatory Meeting for Africa on Women and Health

Moderator report

Session 1: Maternal Health

Towards a comprehensive approach to reducing maternal mortality in Africa

Keys issues and discussions:

The two hour session was quite interactive with the audience responding to issues placed forth by the presenters, sharing of practices in other countries and flagging issues that need to be addressed if maternal health is to be significantly addressed in Africa. Currently Africa is driving the global burden of maternal mortality and morbidity.

The key points highlighted are as follows:

1. National systems need to be strengthened to ensure that women, especially adolescents have access to key services. In strengthening the systems issues of quality, human resource deployment, equity, geographical access and regulation need to be addressed. Many countries have developed national plans and roadmaps and are tracking progress. The discussion benefited from examples from Senegal, Morocco, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger.
2. Adequate investment in health/maternal health programmes is crucial and countries need to examine and report back on the proportion of national budget invested in line with the Abuja commitment of 15%.
3. Service delivery needs to be more women/user friendly by ensuring that the key package (including sexual and reproductive health services, PMTCT, addressing gender-based violence and safe abortion) of essential services is available in an integrated manner close to women, i.e. not vertical and uncoordinated.
4. Community level approaches and innovations need focus, as do efforts to strengthen the participation and support of civil society organisations, religious leaders, NGOs and traditional practitioners. There are many examples within Africa that can be used for advocacy.
5. Technological innovation needs to be part of the strategy to ensure that women, men and communities have the required information. The use of cell phones, community radio, etc need to be tapped into. The message of birth planning and preparedness needs much greater focus
6. Maternal health results will depend on inter-sectoral interventions and approaches. Addressing issues of accessibility delays due to road communication needs a particular focus.
7. Task-shifting is key to addressing the challenges in availability of key human resource skills and professional associations need to be actively engaged in the dialogue. The role of midwives needs to be re-positioned and their skill better utilised and enhanced.
8. Inequities due to financial barriers need to be addressed through social protection/security measures such as cash transfers, health insurance, exemptions, etc.
9. Effective provision and utilisation of maternal health services will also reduce the economic and societal burden that African countries face due to consequences such as Fistula.
10. Strong political leadership at the country, region and global levels is an imperative! This will drive national systems, create community/civil society momentum and lead to results that have a global effect.