

June 15, 2010

Dear Dr. Bustreo,

As women working for decades on women's health and rights in countries of Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America, we write to commend you all for this powerful initiative the Secretary General is leading on improving women and children's health. We applaud the efforts and acknowledge the need for countries to make true on their commitments to improve the health of women.

In taking part of the consultation during the Women Deliver Conference on this Joint Action Plan, we raised the following points which we hope will be taken into consideration in any further revisions:

Health is a state of being, achieved not only through health care, but through lifelong investments in women and girls' education, their opportunities to earn income, their equality under law and in practice, and their protection from all forms of violence that damage their health and threaten their lives. Pregnancy and childbirth is risky and in order to mitigate the negative impacts, we need a strong health sector, in addition to empowering girls and women to protect themselves from unintended pregnancies, HIV infections, early and forced marriage, and other violations of their sexual and reproductive rights.

There is a clear opportunity now with this initiative for preventing health problems, provide prevention services, and enable women and young people to access services. Committing to the health of women and children in all regions of the world, particularly for the most poor and marginalized through elimination of user fees and other basic health care coverage costs, comprehensive sexuality education programs, and protection of their human rights, is crucial to improve women and children's health.

In this regard, the Joint Action Plan can still reflect three basic qualities:

- First, we can only achieve women's health, especially reductions in maternal and neonatal mortality and severe morbidity, by securing well-functioning health systems that deliver quality services in primary health care facilities close to where women live. The most effective use of resources going forward will be investment in health systems to deliver integrated services for women and children. Therefore, any new and existing financial resources should be directed towards providing an integrated package of essential services that includes not only skilled care during pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum, but also contraception, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, HIV and AIDS, TB, Malaria, safe abortion services, and the most effective child health interventions.

- Second, the financing of this initiative should avoid new vertical programs that are separate or channeled through special projects, be part of core funding to the health system, and prioritize women and children through providing the essential package of services described above.
  
- Third, monitoring should be integrated into existing mechanisms for accountability, not new systems or indicators that burden countries and create bureaucratic and financial inefficiencies.

Finally, this work will only be successful if civil society, including women who have experience and expertise on services and programs for women, are engaged in decision making and implementation at every stage and communities are meaningfully involved.

It was mentioned at this Consultation that prior to the UN Summit in September, the United Nations will undertake national level consultations on this plan. We believe national consultations and involving national civil society, including women's rights and health organizations and young people, are essential to base this powerful initiative on the experiences and needs of countries.

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to women's health.

With best wishes,

Lilian Abraczinskas - Mujer y Salud – Uruguay

Mabel Bianco- Foundation for Studies and Research on Women – Argentina

Ishita Chaudhry - The YP Foundation – India

Bene Mandunagu- Girls Power Initiative – Nigeria

Wanda Nowicka- Federation for Women and Family Planning/ ASTRA Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights - Poland