

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

During the recent flare-up of the conflict between Israel and the Gaza Strip, health care services were all but extinguished in Gaza. In this poor Palestinian territory, the average woman has 5.5 children. In the 22 days of conflict before the ceasefire in January, 3,700 women went into labor. Many of the 1,300 civilian deaths were those of mothers and newborns that had no access to skilled birth attendants during the fighting. UNFPA was the first agency on the ground after the ceasefire, preventing countless additional injuries and deaths.

Developing country governments often need financial and technical help in setting up and maintaining sexual and reproductive health programs. They need emergency assistance after natural disasters and warfare. And they need programs that are consistent and reliable. The good news is that one multilateral agency is fully capable of providing such help.

What is UNFPA?

Established in 1969, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is the largest population assistance organization in the world, currently operating in more than 150 countries. Originally called the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, the old acronym is still used. UNFPA works in more countries than any other donor agency and plays a key role in regions where few donors provide population assistance. UNFPA provides assistance only at the request of host governments and operates only voluntary programs. Often, UNFPA runs programs in conjunction with local or national population assistance organizations.

Infant mortality, maternal morbidity and mortality, and HIV/AIDS are just a few consequences of poor reproductive health services. In regions where these problems persist, employment opportunities, literacy rates, gender equality, and universal



A mother and her infant visit a Ghana Health Services nurse. Photo: Melissa May, Courtesy of Photoshare

access to education tend to lag. UNFPA helps developing nations implement the policy infrastructure necessary to address these shortcomings.

UNFPA is guided by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Adopted in 2000, the MDGs set ambitious targets for eradicating poverty and hunger, reducing child mortality, and improving maternal health, among others. One of the key MDG objectives is to achieve universal access to reproductive health and family planning services by 2015. Using data from each target country, staff work with governments to pinpoint the specific services that are needed in each region, charting the course for improvement on reproductive health indicators.

UNFPA operates in accordance with the Programme of Action, created in 1994 at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (ICPD). The main objectives are to provide universal access to reproductive

health services; achieve universal primary education and close the education gender gap; reduce maternal mortality by 75%; reduce infant mortality; increase life expectancy; and reduce HIV infection rates, all by the year 2015.

Abortion Policy

UNFPA does not fund abortions. It is agency policy not to provide assistance for abortions, abortion services, or abortion-related equipment and supplies as a method of family planning. UNFPA seeks to minimize dependence on abortion as a method of family planning, opting instead for preventive services. UNFPA opposes fertility targets, quotas, and China's one-child policy. The pilot program that UNFPA manages in China is designed to educate officials about the effectiveness of voluntary programs.

Why is UNFPA Needed?

More than 200 million women around the world want to delay or end childbearing but are not using modern contraception (a situation called unmet need for family planning). World population is projected to reach between 8 and 11 billion people in 2050. Rapid population growth puts added pressure on the environment and natural resources, impedes development, and reduces the quality of life for everyone.

Family planning can be a leading edge toward preventing many of the burdens caused by ill-timed or unwanted pregnancies. Fully one third of childbirth-related deaths could be prevented with the use of contraception. This includes cases in which women obtain unsafe abortions, and those in which women lack skilled medical attention during childbirth.

Men view contraceptive methods during a reproductive health workshop in the rural village of Hormiguero, Nicaragua. Photo: Katie Richey, Courtesy of Photoshare



UNFPA Successes

- The global fertility rate has dropped from 4.5 to 2.6 since UNFPA started its work.
- During the same period, infant mortality decreased from 9% to 5.4%.
- In the last two years, the rates of infection among young people in nine of the countries most affected by HIV/AIDS have dramatically dropped, demonstrating the positive impact of UNFPA and other international health programs.

Who Supports UNFPA?

UNFPA is funded by voluntary contributions from governments and intergovernmental organizations; it is not part of the regular United Nations budget. In 2007, UNFPA's income from donor countries totaled \$457 million. The top donors were the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, the United Kingdom, Japan and Denmark. Every single country in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean gave money, even if their donations were purely symbolic.

During the Bush Administration, the President withheld congressionally-appropriated funding for UNFPA for seven consecutive years, citing unfounded claims that the agency participates in coerced abortion activities in China. This withholding resulted in a deficit of approximately \$244 to the agency.

President Obama approved the 2009 Omnibus spending bill in March, which included \$50 million for UNFPA. After a long hiatus, the United States has once again joined forces with over 180 countries to support increased access to reproductive health services around the world.

Learn more about UNFPA by visiting our website and signing up for our action alerts at www.populationconnection.org.

Sources

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Population Connection is America's largest grassroots group advocating for progressive action to stabilize world population at a level that can be sustained by the Earth's resources.