

The Weekly

Information Resource Bulletin

FOCUS: FAMILY PLANNING

Malawi is making progress in reducing its mortality rate among mothers, but more can be done.

The maternal mortality ratio in Malawi has declined from 984 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1998-2004 (NSO and ORC Macro, 2005) to 675 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2004-2010 (NSO and ICF Macro, 2011).

Some causes of maternal deaths include: preference for large families and low use of family planning methods, delay in decision making to deliver at a clinic and poor infection prevention practices at hospitals and at homes.

It's important to use family planning methods to avoid unplanned pregnancies and to space births.

The goals of the Weekly Bulletin are:

- To learn from cultural leaders how they support family planning issues their communities
- To encourage cultural leaders to support family planning initiatives in their communities
- To give journalists tips and guidance on their reporting on how cultural can play a role in encouraging families to use family planning methods.

The Problem: Cultural Leaders & Family Planning

According to the Population Reference Bureau, in just over 40 years Malawi's population has increased from four million people in 1966 to 13.1 million in 2008. Today, it is near 15 million.

The reason is our large family sizes. Currently, Malawi's fertility rate stands at between five and six births per woman.

The more children we have per family, the more rapidly the population will continue to grow.

In this bulletin, we will look at the cultural leaders' support for family planning.

Cultural leaders support the social and economic development of their people and it can only be enhanced by planning one's family.

False cultural norms that encourage large families – that is - men should have many children to prove their virility

and women are more valuable when they bear many sons -- should be discouraged by cultural leaders.

Community leaders set and sustain a community's social norms, and are expected to move their society towards a better future while at the same time looking out for the best interests of families and individuals.

Community leaders are essential in introducing change, and they can play an important role in dispelling myths and misperceptions and promoting the use of family planning services.

In Malawi, the sphere of influence of traditional leaders continues to be strong, especially in rural areas. As heads of their communities, traditional leaders are key decision makers and the custodians of tradition, culture and rites.

Activities for Journalists

Use your radio station to help your community, especially cultural leaders such as chiefs/ traditional authorities, understand why they need to support family planning.

Here's why:

Family planning reduces poverty among individuals and communities. When a family has a small number of children it is easy to provide for them. Resources are enough to support for the whole family.

Cultural leaders should support the social and economic development of their people which can only be enhanced by planning one's family.

The list below contains specific reasons as to why community leaders should care about family planning, and what they can achieve if they take action.

Family planning reduces adolescent pregnancies and the risk of sexually transmitted infections. Adolescent pregnancy is a serious problem and elevates the risk of death for both young mothers and their newborns.

Moreover, when teenagers have sex without a condom, they increase their risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. By supporting comprehensive sex education (including both abstinence and condom messages) and family planning for young people who are sexually active, traditional leaders can promote the health and well-being of young people.

Family planning empowers women. Cultural and social norms limit women's decision-making ability in relationships and in the home, contributing to women's lower status. As a result, many women have limited control over their sexual lives, a factor in the higher numbers of unintended pregnancies and births.

As the main caretakers, women with large numbers of

children are less able to participate in community activities or contribute to the community's economic growth. By embracing efforts to make family planning education and services available to all women of childbearing age, traditional leaders will contribute significantly to raising the status of women.

Community leaders can become partners who actively enhance the position of family planning in the community and help mobilize resources. Some of the activities they could undertake to support family planning in their communities are:

- Organize community forums and invite family planning providers and advocates to discuss the benefits of family planning.
- Serve as models and "champions" for family planning by practicing family planning and making public statements about its benefits.

Do a vox pop with some community members and ask them what kind of family planning initiatives are taking place in their communities. Also ask them what role their traditional leaders play in advancing family planning issues in the community.

Have an interview with one of the chiefs in your area to talk about the role chiefs have on issues – such as family planning. Also find out from the chief what he/she is doing to advance family planning issues in his/her community.

Are there women and men in your community who are willing to discuss the difficulties of having a large family?

Useful Contacts

- PRB contact person; Sandra Mapemba: 0999219789
- Chief Kwataine, Champion of safe motherhood; contacts:
- UNFPA, State of the World Population, 2004; <http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2004/english/ch9/pages5.htm>;
- Malawi Demographic Health survey 2010



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