



Pregnant women waiting for their prenatal check in Ambo Koysa Health Post in Humbo Woreda, Wolaita Zone, Ethiopia. © UNFPA/Shibuya Atsushi

# Health and Family Planning

Access to family planning, including the full range of modern contraceptive options, is central to realising reproductive health and rights for women and couples. Voluntary family planning better enables women to prevent unintended pregnancies. It fosters their wellbeing and autonomy. It also supports the health and development of whole communities and societies.

When women are provided with rights-based family planning, they can choose if and when to become pregnant. A woman's ability to make these decisions has a direct impact on her health and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> Family planning includes access to modern contraceptive options and treatments for infertility. This requires quality and accessible supplies and services. Supplies necessary for rights-based family planning include the full range of modern contraceptive options, while services encompass not only healthcare, but also counselling, information and education relating to sexual and reproductive health.<sup>2</sup>

Family planning is a human right in itself, and is indispensable to the realisation of all sexual and reproductive rights. Family planning also contributes to sustainable development and gender equality. The positive effects that can result from investment in voluntary family planning include:

- » **Facilitating choice.** Providing contraceptive options to the 225 million women<sup>3</sup> with unmet need would provide them with more life choices and the ability to plan if and when to have children.
- » **Reducing unintended pregnancies.** Currently, an estimated two out of every five pregnancies is unintended. Meeting the unmet need for contraception would result in 21 million fewer unplanned births.<sup>4</sup>
- » **Reducing maternal deaths.** In Sub-Saharan Africa, the risk of dying during pregnancy is 1 in 38, compared with 1 in 3,700 in developed countries. Satisfying the unmet need for contraception could prevent more than 100,000 maternal deaths annually.<sup>5</sup>
- » **Improving maternal health.** 7 million women experience serious health consequences during pregnancy each year. Much of this is attributable to lack of rights-based healthcare and skilled healthcare professionals.<sup>6</sup>
- » **Reducing unsafe abortion.** Rights-based family planning reduces recourse to unsafe abortion by preventing unintended pregnancies.<sup>7</sup>
- » **Improving sexual health.** Some family planning methods help to prevent the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

Voluntary family planning also positively impacts sustainable development by:

- » **Increasing participation in education.** Freedom to decide the number and spacing of their children creates enhanced opportunities for women in education and public life. Additionally, having smaller families allows parents to invest more in each child. Children with fewer siblings tend to stay in school longer than those with many siblings.<sup>8</sup>

- » **Reducing the vulnerability of young people.** The leading causes of death among young people aged 15-29 are suicide and maternal mortality. Realising the sexual and reproductive rights of young people, including protection from unintended pregnancy, gender-based violence, sexual abuse and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, can enhance their mental and physical health.
- » **Realising the demographic dividend.** When women have the freedom and the means to plan their families, fertility rates decline. If lower fertility rates are accompanied by good social policies, including education provision, a stronger workforce is created. This results in a ‘demographic dividend’ of accelerated economic development.<sup>9</sup>
- » **Reducing poverty and promoting equality.** Providing women and girls with sexual and reproductive choice enables them to break free from cycles of poverty and disadvantage.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations in 2015, consists of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the world’s governments have committed to achieving by 2030. The Goals indicate that sustainable development is possible only when sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), including family planning, have been realised.

- » **Goal 3 on Health** requires universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services, including family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes (target 3.7).
- » **Goal 4 on Education** requires that all learners must be provided with the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development, including education relating to human rights and gender equality (target 4.7).

“Family planning programmes work best when they are part of or linked to broader reproductive health programmes that address closely related health needs and when women are fully involved in the design, provision, management and evaluation of services.”<sup>12</sup>

“As part of the effort to meet unmet needs, all countries should seek to identify and remove all the major remaining barriers to the utilisation of family planning services.” – UN International Conference on Population & Development (ICPD, Cairo 1994), Chapter VII<sup>13</sup>

- » **Goal 5 on Gender Equality** requires the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls; the elimination of harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation; and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights (targets 5.2, 5.3 and 5.6, respectively).

## WHAT CAN THE IRISH GOVERNMENT DO?

Sexual and reproductive rights are key to the achievement of goals and targets across the post-2015 development agenda. Yet, despite its proven benefits, aid for family planning has declined as a proportion of overall aid for health in almost all recipient countries in the past decade.<sup>10</sup> Irish Government policy on international development recognises that allowing women to control their reproductive health is ‘essential to women’s empowerment and the health of nations.’<sup>11</sup> The Irish Government can take a number of actions:

- » Publish a national action plan for implementing the SDGs—a plan that prioritises the SRHR targets. This is a necessary basis for a transformative rights-based agenda.
- » Increase funding for programmes in developing countries that provide quality and accessible sexual and family planning information and services, as part of an overall increase in funding for health and health systems strengthening.
- » Use Ireland’s influence at the global level to support policies and programmes aimed at realising women’s right to family planning and to make informed choices about the number and spacing of their children.

1. World Health Organisation (2013). Family Planning: Factsheet 351.
2. Countdown 2015 Europe: Family planning saves lives and improves health. Factsheets 2012.
3. Singh, Darroch & Ashford (2014). Adding it up: the costs and benefits of investing in sexual and reproductive health. Guttmacher/UNFPA.
4. Countdown 2015 Europe, as above.
5. Ahmed, Li, Liu & Tsui (2012). Maternal deaths averted by contraceptive use: an analysis of 172 countries. The Lancet, 380 (9837) pp. 111-125.

6. World Health Organisation (2014). MDG 5: Improve Maternal Health. Available at [http://www.who.int/topics/millennium\\_development\\_goals/maternal\\_health/en/](http://www.who.int/topics/millennium_development_goals/maternal_health/en/).
7. World Health Organisation (2013), as above.
8. World Health Organisation (2013), as above.
9. Universal Access Project. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and Economic Benefits. Briefing cards: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and the Post-2015 Development Agenda.
10. Countdown 2015 Europe, as above.

11. Irish Aid, One World One Future: Ireland’s Policy for International Development 2013-2016.
12. ICPD Programme of Action, para 7.13.
13. ICPD Programme of Action, para 7.19.

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The Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) acts as the secretariat to the All Party Oireachtas Interest Group on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Development.

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