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# Reducing newborn mortality through people-centred capacity development

On 25 September 2015, the 193 member countries of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These 17 goals and 169 targets cover a broad range of sustainable development issues. They range from ending poverty and hunger to improving health and education, achieving gender equality, making cities more sustainable, combating climate change, protecting oceans and forests, or creating justice for all.

The SDGs succeed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that guided international development thinking for the past 15 years. While their general legacy is a mixed one, they clearly delivered many encouraging results. Among them, both child and maternal mortality have halved since the 1990 baseline. Likewise, the average annual child mortality reduction rate has more than doubled in the past 10 years compared with the previous decade.<sup>1</sup>

When looking at the numbers in more detail though, it becomes obvious that progress for one particular area of child mortality was much slower than for the rest: newborn mortality and stillbirths. In 2015, there are still about 2.7 million annual neonatal deaths, now accounting for no less than 45% of all under-five mortality.<sup>2</sup> Added to this, more than 2.6 million third trimester stillbirths occur globally each year.<sup>3</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that more than 80% of these deaths result from three preventable and treatable conditions – complications due to prematurity, intrapartum-related deaths and neonatal infections.<sup>4</sup> But while cost-effective evidence-based interventions exist, their coverage especially in low- and middle-income countries continues to be very low.<sup>5</sup> As a result, observers have started to call interventions in newborn health “surely one of the best investments in health and also human rights.”<sup>6</sup>

Addressing this unfinished MDG child survival agenda, the new overarching health goal SDG3 includes a clear reference and call for action as its second target: “By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under five years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under-five mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births.”<sup>7</sup> An essential challenge in many low- and middle-income countries, especially in Africa and Asia, is that only few health

providers conducting birth in health facilities have adequate skills and equipment. This makes the development of workforce capacity of those rendering newborn care a top priority.

It is in this regard that the Council of International Neonatal Nurses (COINN) and the Global Engagement Institute (GEI) have recently launched the initiative Engage for Healthy Newborns (EHN).<sup>8</sup> As a recognised global leader in neonatal nursing care, COINN has an extensive history in promoting evidence-based practice and providing educational resources and research opportunities. Its activities are benefiting many parts of the world that normally do not have access to this level of specialised professional leadership and guidance. This experience connects well with GEI’s expertise in facilitating large-scale people-centred capacity development programmes in Africa and Asia.

EHN responds to targeted capacity development requests of institutional partners such as health ministries in selected host countries. Instead of sending consultants and international development professionals, however, it works through delegations of qualified international and regional volunteers who join forces with local colleagues. These teams pursue a train-the-trainer model, are certified in relevant training modules for neonatal resuscitation and essential care, and gain immediate first-hand teaching experience. Moving far beyond the mere transfer of skills, this concept further increases professional motivation, self-awareness, assertiveness and confidence of all involved. It also creates international professional networks and friendships that are vital for educational and professional advancement.

The training modules are derived from the Helping Babies Survive programme that was developed by the Global Development Alliance spearheaded by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Its most well-known module, Helping Babies Breathe (HBB), features among WHO’s recommended training curricula and was recently listed as one of ten transformative breakthrough innovations in global health for recommended further scale-up in a report presented by Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, to the UN General Assembly.<sup>9</sup> HBB’s positive impact on lowering early neonatal mortality and stillbirth rates is increasingly understood. A large study involving eight Tanzanian hospitals with 78,500

births over 3.5 years, for example, has demonstrated an extensive reduction in early neonatal mortality by 47%.

Attention on people-centred capacity development approaches is growing. While international development colleagues still regularly find it hard to take the work of professional volunteers seriously, the spirit of the SDGs speaks a different language. Key reports highlight the increasing importance of purpose-driven multi-stakeholder partnerships as well as of peer learning and the sharing of knowledge, experience and technology.<sup>10</sup>

In the words of the UN's High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda: "We envision a world in 2030 where a renewed global partnership... has transformed the world through a universal, people-centred and planet-sensitive development agenda achieved with the shared commitment and accountability of all."<sup>11</sup> It is this spirit that COINN and GEI seek to promote through EHN.

EHN warmly invites professionals and students in nursing, midwifery, neonatology and paediatrics to join its global effort in reducing newborn mortality. Individuals can participate in international volunteer delegations that travel to countries such as Rwanda or Vietnam to engage with local colleagues in peer learning and the sharing of knowledge, experience and technology. More generally, EHN fosters the development of international professional networks and friendships. Organisations and institutions are also welcome to join the growing multi-stakeholder partnership; please get in touch to explore opportunities for involvement.

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