

Family Planning, Africa's unmet need threatening development efforts

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KAMPALA -- Inadequate family planning services in Africa is one of the neglected needs that are threatening to reverse the continent's achieved economic successes, experts meeting here have warned.

The experts attending the International Conference on Family Planning: Research and Practices said that family planning, with an aim to slow down population growth and optimize population structure, has fallen off the development agenda of many developing and developed countries.

As a result, there is an increase in unintended pregnancies leading to a rapid population growth and in some cases unsafe abortions, which caused many deaths.

Werner Haug, Director of the Technical Division at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), told Xinhua in an interview on Monday that African countries have started feeling the impact and realizing the need to respond.

"Increasingly governments realize that it is extremely difficult to achieve for instance education goals, health goals with a population that is doubling every 20 years," he said.

Stephen Mallinga, Uganda's Health Minister, said that the rapid population growth will force governments to spend their meager resources on providing social services to the high population.

Stern Bernstien, a Senior Policy Advisor in the Technical Department of UNFPA, also told reporters on Monday that because of the high population pressure there is a lot of stress on the ecosystems.

He said issues like food security, land tenure, environmental degradation and water supply are all hinged on population. Civil strife is also often caused by the population pressure on scarce resources.

Janet Museveni, Uganda's First Lady, while opening the four-day conference on Sunday, said that because of the inadequate family planning services many women are having a lot of children too soon or too late which puts their health in danger and also reduces their capacity to engage in economic activities.

"Globally we lose over 15 billion U.S. dollars per year in terms of women productivity as a result of maternal morbidity and mortality," she said.

"Persistent high maternal and infant mortality and morbidity rate continues to be of a major concern especially in our developing countries," she added.

The experts at the meeting attended by over 1,300 delegates from 59 countries argue that the rapid population growth due to the increasing unintended pregnancies is threatening the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

According to them family planning is essential in achieving three of the MDGs, which include reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, and promoting gender equality.

It also helps in the achievement of the goals of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education and combating HIV/AIDS.

HIGH POPULATION DEBATE

There are two varying views on whether the high population is an advantage to Africa or not. Some circles argue that a high population is favorable for providing bigger market like the case of China.

Others, however, believed that a high population is a burden to a country as it competes with other government's priorities over limited resources.

Haug argued that China's economic development comes not only from its population but also from the family planning policies.

"China has a big economic growth and real boost, to a large degree, because they introduced very strict family planning program," he said.

"People recognize that lowering fertility had a huge boost on the economy because you have more people in the labor market but at the same time the dependence ratio is going down," he added.

Bience Gawanas, African Union Commissioner for Social Affairs, said that while the situation may look grim in Africa, there are a lot of initiatives that are already in place, citing the African Union Maputo Plan of Action which guides governments on issues of reproductive health.

She told Xinhua in an interview that what African governments need to do is to expand the provision of family planning services in the rural areas.

Bernstien said that already some success stories have been recorded in Rwanda and Ethiopia.

He said, quoting an Ethiopian official, that the Eastern African country has added over 30,000 community health workers to its health system.

He said several countries in Africa are also trying to adopt the same system of recruiting community health workers so that they can provide health services in villages.

Michael Klag, Dean of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said that in order to fight poverty effectively, family planning has to get on to the global health agenda as funding to family planning programs has declined over years.

Bernstien said that as developed countries recover from the effects of the global economic downturn, African governments need to invest more of their domestic resources in family planning.

According to the conference organizers, a 12-million-U.S. dollar project expected to revitalize family planning on the global agenda is expected to be announced at the end of the meeting on Thursday. The countries that will benefit from the program are Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Indonesia, India and Pakistan.

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