

If Uganda checks population growth, she saves Shs400bn



Health & Living

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Uganda needs \$107 million (about Shs200 billion) over the next eight years to address the worrying population growth rate of 3.2 percent per year. The money has to be channelled into buying contraceptives to meet the high unmet need for family planning services, which is the reason behind the country's skyrocketing population growth.

This was revealed by Population Reference Bureau's Rhonda Smith while presenting a paper 'Uganda on the move' policymakers' seminar on financing health-related Millennium Development Goals, during the International Conference on Family Planning at Speke Resort Munyonyo.

If Shs 200 billion were committed, Smith says, the country would be able to save \$200 million by 2015, which is twice the amount needed to meet the unmet need for family planning.

"[It] translates into savings –savings that are possible because as women have fewer children, government doesn't have to spend as much money to meet the needs of the population and can save money on costs related to maternal health, immunisation, water and sanitation, education and malaria," she noted.

This type of economic gain, according to Smith, has been witnessed in East and South-east Asia. For instance, in 1975 Thailand had a gross national income of only \$740 per person because of a relatively high birth-rate of 4-5 children per woman.

But by 2005, Thailand had raised its gross national income per capita to \$8,500 after its birth-rate decreased to two children per woman. With such success stories, there is again growing recognition of the importance of family planning as a health intervention but also as an essential ingredient of development planning.

Policy makers in Africa have begun to appreciate the linkages between population, health and development, both at the macro and micro-levels. Several African mothers want to space or limit future births, but they are unable to access contraception.

According to Population Secretariat statistics, only 18% of Ugandan women are using modern methods of family planning. Yet about two in every five women would love to space their children or stop having children altogether.

As a result of unmet need for family planning, there are large numbers of unplanned pregnancies.

In Uganda, almost half of all pregnancies are unwanted. This means that more than 850,000 women become pregnant without intending to have a child at that time.

This has resulted in high death rates, particularly as young girls are among those getting pregnant.

Each year, for every 100,000 children born in Uganda, 435 mothers die due to pregnancy-related complications, and yet for every one woman who dies from maternal causes, 20-30 women suffer short and long term disabilities.

According to Smith, if the situation remains the same, Uganda could lose an equivalent of Shs 700 billion in lost productivity due to maternal deaths between 2004 and 2013. During the same period, maternal disability could cost Uganda another Shs1.5 trillion.

However, if maternal death and disabilities are reduced by 50% by 2013, it would result in an economic gain of Shs 500 billion. "We should ensure that family planning is a key component of all national development strategies, including poverty reduction strategy and action and increase budget allocations for contraceptives in national and district health budgets.

When we have healthier women, we break the poverty cycle among many families and ensure women's full contribution to the nation's economy," Smith noted. "Our parents desired 6-7 children but young couples today want 3-4 children.

Women across the country report they want fewer children than what they have," she added. Smith said a growing population means more demand for social services –that means more schools, hospitals putting pressure on government budget which means slow economic growth.

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