

Women's access to health services boosts gender equality, says UNDP chief



UNDP Administrator Helen Clark

2 September 2009 – Access to sexual and reproductive health will boost development targets and promote gender equality, the head of the United Nations Development Programme (**UNDP**) said today, stressing that women have the right to choose for themselves whether or when to have children.

"As long as 200 million women in the world have an unmet need for family planning, their chances of finishing their education, being in paid work, and breaking out of poverty are reduced," UNDP Administrator Helen Clark said in Berlin, Germany, at a gathering of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on the issue of health and development.

Achieving universal access to reproductive health – part of the Millennium Development Goals (**MDGs**) – remains a massive challenge, she said, with donor funding for family planning plummeting in most developing countries in recent years.

Such cuts also jeopardize progress made in slashing poverty, advancing infant and child health and improving women and girls' status overall, Miss Clark said.

"I believe that women have the right to make their own decisions about whether and when to have children, how many to have, and with whom – and then to receive support and care to give birth safely," she told the forum.

UNDP is mandated to promote the empowerment of women and incorporate gender perspectives and women's participation into its programming, the agency's Administrator said.

"We cannot hope to reach the MDGs if 50 per cent of the world's people are not afforded equal rights and opportunities," she highlighted. "Addressing the needs of women needs to be at the heart of the development agenda everywhere."

Given the global recessions, additional resources are crucial to prevent hard-fought development gains in poor nations from being rolled back, with women and girls potentially being hit hardest by the downturn, Miss Clark stressed.

"Providing development assistance at this time is a moral imperative," she said. "It should be of concern to all of us that those least responsible for the economic crisis stand to bear the brunt of its effects, including through impacts on their health and access to services."

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