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Is East Africa on track to meet maternal and child health SDGs?

Latest indicators prove that national programmes and investments can secure consistent progress.

By Jennifer Orisakwe

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According to a UN report, a mother dies every two hours due to pregnancy-related complications, a staggering reminder of the struggle to ensure safe motherhood. Despite progress in reducing maternal mortality, the pace of change remains woefully slow, leaving countless families shattered by preventable tragedy.

Can East Africa accelerate its efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals for maternal and child health, or will the lives of countless mothers and children continue to hang in the balance?

One important metric for assessing the health of a country is maternal and child health (MCH). MCH is given priority in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seeks to lower the rates of under-five and maternal mortality. Even though MCH has improved in East Africa, there are still major obstacles to overcome.

The maternal and child health indicators for East Africa paint a mixed image. Maternal mortality ratios (MMRs) are at 442 deaths per 100,000 live births, however, the rates are rising in Rwanda (210) and Kenya (530). South Sudan (1,223) and Somalia (1,400) are further behind.

There are 81 fatalities per 1,000 live births, or the under-five mortality rate (U5MR), with Tanzania and Ethiopia (between 100 to 499), and other countries seeing decreases. There is substantial variation in infant mortality rates (IMR), ranging from 38 in Rwanda to 74 in Somalia. While some nations are getting close to the SDG targets, others still have large disparities. The inconsistent progress made by the region towards SDG 3.1 (MMR < 70) and 3.2 (U5MR < 25) highlights the necessity of focused interventions and increased efforts to meet these targets.

There are several obstacles that prevent East Africa from making progress in maternal and child health (MCH). Inadequate health outcomes are made worse by limited access

to healthcare, especially in rural areas. Health inequities are especially entrenched among women who are impoverished and lack education. There is a severe shortage of qualified healthcare professionals in the region as well; in certain countries, there is only one doctor for every 10,000 people.

Poor finance, shoddy health systems, and poor infrastructure further impede the provision of high-quality MCH services. The difficulties in achieving SDG 3.1 and 3.2 are a direct result of these obstacles, emphasising the necessity of focused initiatives to eliminate them.

Amid challenges, there have also been some major wins. Maternal mortality has decreased by 75 per cent as a result of Rwanda's community-based health insurance scheme, which has also improved access to MCH treatments. Task-sharing in Kenya has increased the number of experienced birth attendants, while community-based care has improved health outcomes in Ethiopia through the Health Extension Program. Tanzania improved MCH service delivery through creative use of mobile health technologies. These success stories show how innovative approaches and best practices can enhance MCH in East Africa. The region can be assured of improved health outcomes for mothers and children while also accelerating progress towards the SDG targets by scaling up and duplicating existing models.

East Africa must continue to invest in maternal and child health (MCH) to meet the SDG targets. It is vital to address the difficulties and obstacles previously mentioned, to close the apparent gaps. Governments, healthcare providers, and other stakeholders must work together and coordinate to guarantee efficient resource allocation, service delivery, and policy execution.

Together, East Africa can strengthen its health systems, enhance MCH results, and accelerate the region's progress toward the SDG goals. Sustained efforts and investments are required to

meet these SDG goals. The MCH difficulties facing the region must be addressed with cooperation and collaboration.

Collectively as healthcare experts, let us make sure that every mother and child in East Africa receives quality healthcare, and that no one is left behind.

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