

Underlying and structural causes of maternal and child mortality

Maternal, newborn and under-five deaths and undernutrition have a number of common structural and underlying causes, including:

- Poorly resourced, unresponsive and culturally inappropriate health and nutrition services.
- Food insecurity.
- Inadequate feeding practices.
- Lack of hygiene and access to safe water or adequate sanitation.
- Female illiteracy.
- Early pregnancy.
- Discrimination and exclusion of mothers and children from access to essential health and nutrition services and commodities due to poverty and geographic or political marginalization.

These factors result in millions of unnecessary deaths each year. Their wide-ranging nature and interrelatedness require them to be addressed at different levels – community, household, service provider, government and international – in an integrated manner to maximize effectiveness and reach.

The solutions to these impediments are well known, particularly those relating to the direct causes of maternal, neonatal and child deaths. The necessary interventions involve the provision of packages of essential primary-health-care services for children across a *continuum of care* that spans pregnancy, childbirth and after delivery, leading to care for children in the crucial early years of life (see *Panel, page 17, for a full definition of the continuum of care*).

See References, page 104.