

## NEPAL

### **Community Partnerships Broaden Access to Maternal and Neonatal Health Care**

In Nepal, mountainous terrain, difficult weather conditions and the scarcity of roads are an obstacle for rural families in need of maternal or neonatal care. In regions where a single foot path winding its way through the mountains is all that connects one small village from the next, women typically give birth at home, without the assistance of a nurse, doctor or midwife. Indeed, only 19 per cent of all deliveries in Nepal are aided by a skilled birth attendant.

Less than half of Nepal's population has access to all-weather roads, making it difficult for up to 95 per cent of mothers and newborns to reach modern healthcare facilities. For many Nepalese parents, it takes several days to reach a healthcare centre, and the expense of travel can be a deterrent for poor families. For those in need of emergency obstetric care, this geographic divide is far too often a death sentence for mother and child.

In remote locations such as these, community partnerships can prove invaluable in terms of reaching women and children, providing outreach services that monitor their health, educate mothers about proper nutrition and hygiene for themselves and their children, and identify problems that require facility-based treatment. At their best, community partnerships not only broaden access to services and facilitate closer contact between health workers and remote communities through home visits, but they also encourage behavioural changes – such as exclusive breastfeeding, regular hand-washing or, where needed, sleeping under insecticide-treated nets to prevent malaria.

Community health workers in Nepal have collaborated with skilled medical personnel for decades to provide care to mothers, newborns and children. Launched in 1988 by the Nepalese government with support from UNICEF and other partners, the Female Community Health Volunteer Programme boasts a corps of nearly 50,000 women throughout the country who have been trained to provide key services and interventions for pregnant women and children. Known throughout Nepal as pillars of the health system these volunteers provide services at the community level such as Vitamin A supplementation, distributing de-worming tablets, managing diarrhea and pneumonia, and supporting polio and measles immunization campaigns. Largely thanks to their efforts, Nepal has succeeded in reducing child mortality by two-thirds in the past 15 years.

In contrast, neonatal death rates have not fallen as dramatically. A great many newborns born at home are lost due to hypothermia, asphyxia, complications resulting from low birth weight, and infection. To combat this problem, the

Government of Nepal – together with UNICEF and partners – has introduced a newborn care package component to the community health partnership, enabling community volunteers to provide a series of interventions to drastically reduce neonatal mortality. By providing services during home deliveries such as proper wiping and wrapping of the baby, encouraging skin to skin contact to prevent hypothermia and after-birth asphyxia, and monitoring for severe infections, community workers can prevent 67 per cent of all neonatal deaths, experts estimate.