

Partnering for mothers and newborns in the Central African Republic

The Central African Republic is among the world's lowest income countries, with a gross national income per capita of US\$360 in 2007. Located in the heart of the African continent, the country has endured a decade of conflict. The worst-affected regions are located in the northeast and northwest, where rebel groups and government forces frequently clash. This ongoing violence has resulted in mass displacement and disruption of public infrastructure such as health care services, especially in the northern region.

Maternal and neonatal survival and health remain at risk from poverty and conflict. The lifetime risk of maternal death is 1 in 25, and UN inter-agency estimates put the country's maternal mortality ratio at 980 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 2005. The neonatal mortality rate was 52 per 1,000 live births in 2004, above the West and Central Africa average of 44 per 1,000 – which itself was the highest regional aggregate for this indicator in the developing world. Only 53 per cent of women in the country are attended by a skilled health worker at delivery.

Maternal and infant health is undermined by poor control of communicable diseases, insecurity and the lack of comprehensive maternal health programmes. Among other infectious diseases, tetanus is an important cause of neonatal death. Cases are prevalent in poor, remote and disenfranchised communities where unhygienic obstetric

and post-natal practices prevail and access to maternal tetanus toxoid immunization during pregnancy is poor.

Despite the challenges posed by ongoing insecurity, international agencies are collaborating with the Government to tackle maternal and neonatal tetanus as part of a wider effort in support of maternal, newborn and child health. In January 2008, the Ministry of Health, together with the World Health Organization, the United Nations Population Fund and UNICEF, launched the Mother and Child Survival Campaign. The first phase of the campaign prioritized immunization, resulting in the vaccination of 700,000 women of reproductive age against tetanus. A second round of immunization was held in March, and the campaign is set to reach 1.5 million women and children across the country. The tetanus immunization campaign represents an important initial step in the drive to reduce maternal and neonatal deaths.

The Central African Republic and its partners face the challenge of consolidating these gains and strengthening the health system to deliver maternity services and basic health-care interventions that can help improve maternal and newborn health. Enhancing security will also be pivotal to widening access to women and children.

See References, pages 112.