The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—a set of eight important, time-bound goals ranging from reducing poverty by half to providing universal primary education—represent a blueprint for global development agreed to by member states of the United Nations and international development institutions. However, achieving them will be a major challenge for India and many other developing countries that are not “on track” to meet the goals by the target date of 2015. As stated by former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, it will take time and commitment to mobilize the necessary resources, train the required personnel, and establish the needed infrastructure to meet the MDGs.

In India and other Asian countries, one major factor contributing to the challenge is the continued rapid growth of the population. The number of people in need of health, education, economic, and other services is large and increasing, which, in turn, means that the amount of resources, personnel, and infrastructure required to meet the MDGs is also increasing. In light of this fact, development efforts in support of the MDGs should not overlook the importance and benefits of slowing population growth.

This brief uses a methodology described in a multi-country study titled “Achieving the Millennium Development Goals: The Contribution of Family Planning,” which looked at how one strategy—meeting the need for family planning—can reduce population growth and make achieving the MDGs more affordable, in addition to directly contributing to the goals of reducing child mortality and improving maternal health.

Reducing MDG Costs

High rates of population growth are largely the result of frequent childbearing or high fertility—often corresponding with a large unmet need for family planning (FP). In India, women still have, on average, about 2.6 children each (SRS, 2008), and surveys show that the unmet need for FP services is high (14.6 percent of married women of reproductive age want to space or limit births but are not currently using any method of family planning [DLHS-3, 2007-08, Definition II]). If access to family planning services was increased, this unmet need could be met, thereby slowing population growth and reducing the costs of meeting the MDGs.

The analysis estimated the extent of the cost savings for five of the eight MDGs. Costs were calculated under two scenarios:

• Achieve universal primary education (MDG 2)
• Reduce child mortality (MDG 4)
• Improve maternal health (MDG 5)
• Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases (MDG 6)
• Ensure environmental sustainability (MDG 7)

For example, the cost of achieving the MDG for universal primary education is influenced by the number of children needing education. Fulfilling unmet need
for family planning would result in fewer children requiring education, and as a result, there would be lower costs for universal primary education. Figure 1 shows the cumulative cost savings from 2010–2015 to the education sector from satisfying unmet need—$1.45 billion would be saved by 2015. Because the effects of family planning are not immediate, long-term benefits would be even larger if the timeline were extended past 2015. Similar methodology was applied to other sectors working to meet the MDGs, revealing cost savings in meeting the immunization, water and sanitation, maternal health, and tuberculosis targets (see Figure 2).

Improving Maternal and Child Health

In addition to the cost savings incurred by addressing unmet need, greater use of FP services can contribute directly to the MDG goals to reduce child mortality and improve maternal health; family planning helps reduce the number of high-risk pregnancies that result in high levels of maternal and child illness and death. The study shows that addressing unmet need in India could be expected to avert 2.1 million maternal and child deaths by the target date of 2015.

Conclusion

Increasing access to and use of family planning is a key component for MDG 5B; and, as this analysis has shown, it makes valuable contributions to achieving many of the other goals. Increased contraceptive use can significantly reduce the costs of achieving selected MDGs and directly contribute to reductions in maternal and child mortality. The cost savings in meeting the five MDGs by satisfying unmet need outweigh the additional costs of family planning by a factor of 7 to 1.

April 2010, based on NFHS-3 (2005-06), DLHS-3 (2007-08), and SRS (multiple years)