

## **Preventing maternal deaths: the need for transformational leadership**

**Friday Okonofua**

*Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology, and*

*Former Presidential Adviser on Health*

Numerous reports from several local and international sources indicate that Nigeria currently has one of the highest rates of maternal mortality in the world. Data recently reported in the prestigious Lancet journal showed that although maternal mortality declined in the rest of the world between 2000 and 2008, Nigeria was one of six countries that accounted for more than 50% of the global estimates of maternal deaths. Indeed, estimates indicate that if this trend continues, Nigeria would be unable to attain the fifth Millennium Development Goal, aimed at reducing maternal mortality by 75% by the year 2015. The consequence will be that the rest of the world would also not be able to achieve this target, and the persisting high rates of mortality in Nigeria (and the other five countries) will one reason for this failure. Thus, despite the diplomatic niceties that were demonstrated during the recent visit of the UN Secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki Moon to Nigeria, it was evident to discerning observers that he came to push the agenda of encouraging the country to prioritize the reduction of its high rate of maternal and child mortality. To those of us who have vested interest and who watched the events on television, there can be no doubt that he did an extremely good job in pushing this agenda among key political office holders in this country.

Diseases of pregnant women and children are the two twin public health challenges that currently account for 70% of the disease and mortality burden in Nigeria. They are largely responsible for the low and declining life expectancy in the country and the low quality of life that is recorded for Nigeria among the comity of nations. Yet, indicators for measuring progress in the delivery of maternal and child health services are now the most important indicators for measuring the quality of life of citizens of countries. Maternal, neonatal, infant and under-five mortality statistics when assessed and reviewed are now used to measure the level of development of nations, and the extent to which countries address basic human rights and social justice principles. The continued under-performance of Nigeria in indicators of maternal and child health must be seen as a major challenge in efforts to re-position this country as an important world player and a model African economy.

Worldwide, the need to engender survival is now the under-pinning purpose of development. Although economic indicators such as Gross National Product, Income per Capita, etc are still important for rating and comparing countries, it is the level of survival that tell the whole story about the essence of life and living in a particular country. Indeed, the reason that countries seek high quality infrastructure, regular power and water supply, good and effective means of transportation and communication is to promote improved quality of life and ensure prolonged survival for its citizenry. Therefore, a country may have increased economic growth potential as we are currently witnessing in Nigeria, but if our health and mortality indicators are poor, it will not speak well of us as a nation. It will simply mean that the nation's wealth is not evenly distributed, and that possibly, only a few individuals are benefiting from the economic prosperity that the country is experiencing. It is actually better for a country to have modest economic growth but to have more robust social and health indicators, which will imply that the country is

balanced in terms of social equity and the attention it pays to the well-being of its people. An example of such a country is Sri Lanka, which has a modest economy, but which has one of the most phenomenal health and social indicators in the developing world. Sri Lanka is celebrated in the world today as one country that has paid attention to the development of the health and social well-being of its people. Its maternal mortality has remained consistently low despite the limited nature of its economy.

The purpose of this article is to request our new administrations at the national and state levels to focus on providing strategic leadership that will lead to the reduction of maternal and child mortality in the country. Mr. Ban Ki Moon during his visit to Nigeria announced that the United Nations has set aside the sum of US\$40 billion to address the problem of high rate of maternal mortality in the African region. This is highly commendable. However, it must be recognized that this is only a catalytic fund meant to assist countries, and it is by no means an end in itself. Countries need to be on the driving seat by developing top-notch political priority for reducing maternal mortality as an essential issue in governance. Without such a political prioritization, even the funds provided by the United Nations will not be effectively used to impact on maternal mortality reduction. The efforts will also not be sustained as the country will then have to wait for another round of funding on the expiration of these funds before new initiatives can begin. The lack of adequate political will for entrenching and sustaining interventions to address maternal and child health has remained the bane of previous efforts to reduce the high rate of maternal mortality in this country. The governments at both the national and sub-national levels must take over the ownership of these efforts in order to maintain and sustain them over time.

Reduction in maternal mortality can only be achieved if all sectors are involved and galvanized. A multi-sectoral approach involving all sectors – health, educational, women affairs, youth and social development, finance, agriculture and national planning – all need to direct programmatic attention to solving the problem. This implies that the President himself at the federal level, the Governors at the state levels, and even Local Government Chairmen should provide strategic and visionary leadership to coordinate the related activities, while the Ministries of Health at the national and state levels, will provide the technical and monitoring oversights needed to drive the initiatives.

Having conducted research and service delivery on safe motherhood in this country for more than twenty years, I would like to propose three strategies that governments should adopt to address this problem. Firstly, the President and the State Governors must seek personal understanding of what the issues relating to maternal and child mortality are, and the principles behind the exposition of MDGs 4 and 5, and indeed, all the MDGs by the United Nations. While they can designate officials to carry out these responsibilities, they themselves must be knowledgeable about these issues, otherwise they will not be able to develop sufficient visioning needed to address the problem. With this knowledge, for example, leaders will be able to include maternal and child health issues in their prepared or unprepared speeches, which will go long way to raise the profile of the problem in national consciousness. Secondly, Chief Executives at National and State levels should ensure that their vision on reducing maternal and child mortality is well disseminated and well understood by stakeholders and constituents throughout the country, and that competent administrators who understand the vision are deployed to implement the related activities. Thirdly, and most importantly, they must allocate

adequate budget towards activities to promote maternal and child health, and ensure that the funds are properly utilized for this purpose.

The 2001 Abuja Declaration during which African Governments pledged to allocate 15% of their annual budget to health is one of the most purposeful health innovations that have ever taken place in the African continent. Nigerian governments at both the national and sub-national levels must endeavor to meet this target, and ensure that a substantial proportion of the allocated funds are devoted towards the implementation of maternal and child health services. The recent passage of the national Health Bill by the national Assembly provides another opportunity for the government to allocate adequate financial resources to improve maternal and child health services. However, adequate funding is not the only issue. To ensure that the funds are efficiently and effectively utilized, a robust and transparent project monitoring, budget tracking and financial management mechanisms must also be put in place. Finally, it must be borne in mind that this new administration is at the threshold of history and is holding the last baton in a relay race to the date of judgment on the Millennium Development Goals, which is 2015. This is the date during which this administration will also be completing its tenure, and will inevitably be assessed on the basis of the achievement or non-achievement of these goals. Therefore, the time to act is now, when everything can still be put in place to project Nigeria as a country where change is possible.