

2010 UN Population Award Ceremony

June 3, 2010
William H. Gates Sr.

Madam Deputy Secretary-General,

Ms. Thoraya Obaid, Secretary to the Committee for the United Nations Population Award,

Distinguished Members of the Committee for the United Nations Population Award,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Friends,

On behalf of my son and daughter-in-law, Bill and Melinda Gates, and on behalf of the foundation that we chair together, I want to say how humbling it is to receive the United Nations Population Award. The United Nations helped pioneer the field of family planning. You are recognizing Bill and Melinda today because they followed your lead.

I also want to congratulate the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development on its award. The rhetoric about global health and development is so often pessimistic. But just as often, reality gives reasons for optimism. The success that the AFPPD has enjoyed since its founding in 1981 proves just how much can be accomplished with consistent effort.

Bill and Melinda regret that they cannot be here to receive the award in person. They are both out of the country—Bill in Spain and Melinda in Mexico—fulfilling previous obligations on behalf of the foundation. But they asked me to explain that this honor is especially meaningful, because family planning first sparked their interest in global health 15 years ago.

The occasion of this ceremony has given them the opportunity to reflect on why they started the Gates Foundation in the first place, and how much progress they have seen since then.

Bill and Melinda's thinking on a host of issues has evolved as they continue to learn, but their core convictions about family planning remain unchanged. They believe—as I believe—that access to voluntary family planning is a woman's right, and that *universal* access is central to any serious program of global health and development.

Family planning saves the lives of mothers and their babies.

And it does even more than *save* lives; it also *improves* lives. When women and men can make important decisions about their family—how many children to have, at what age to have them, and how long to wait in between pregnancies—they gain the power to shape their future. The ability to plan helps women, their families, their communities—and whole nations—become happier, safer, and more prosperous.

The Millennium Development Goals make the importance of family planning abundantly clear. Family planning is critical to achieving the health goals, including saving mothers and children and combating infectious disease. Family planning also supports the goals on poverty, education, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. In human terms, that means that the best way for the world to meet the most basic needs of its poorest people is by ensuring that they have access to family planning.

Right now, however, the world is far from that goal. 215 million women want to use contraceptives but don't have that option.

This year, 150,000 of these women will die from a pregnancy-related cause.

640,000 babies born to these women will die in their first month.

Simply by meeting the unmet need for family planning we could reduce maternal mortality by up to 40 percent, and infant mortality by 20 percent.

Given the circumstances I just described—a proven intervention, with wide-ranging benefits, that hundreds of millions of women wish were available to them, and whose absence leads directly to almost 1 million people dying—there is a paradox about family planning in the year 2010 that is difficult to grasp.

This urgent priority keeps getting less, and less, funding. In the nine years between 1997 and 2006, donor money dedicated to family planning went down by 40 percent, from about \$650 million to less than \$400 million a year. Quite simply, we stopped paying for one of the best health tools we have.

There are a few explanations for this paradox.

First, family planning has been a victim of its own success. Because it was so effective in most parts of Southeast Asia and Latin America, and in large countries in the Near East, many people believe the job is done. They don't understand how much work remains in Sub-Saharan Africa and large swaths of South Asia.

Second, in many countries, family planning has become a lightning rod for the abortion debate. But the essence of family planning is access to contraceptives. And studies show that universal access to family planning would *prevent* millions of abortions that occur because women were not able to access contraception.

A third reason for this paradox is that people look at family planning through different lenses. Some tend to see from a demographic perspective, while others take a women's health perspective. But I don't believe those two perspectives have to be mutually exclusive.

My son, Bill, likes to pore over reams of demographic data. That's how his mind works. But when he meets the people represented by the numbers, he is deeply moved. That is why he travels to meet with grantees and the people they serve many times each year. My daughter-in-law Melinda is a passionate and inspiring advocate for women and children's empowerment, but she knows her way around a spreadsheet, too.

People may think of family planning in slightly different ways, but they're working toward the same goal: helping people improve their lives.

The fourth reason for the paradox of family planning is that the field of reproductive health started to strain under its own weight. Over the years, we have come to understand how complicated and interconnected women's health issues are. As a result, new priorities were continually being added to the agenda. That is a good thing, but it is also a challenge. We struggle with the challenge of competing priorities at the Gates Foundation, too.

Although it is important to address people's health needs from the broadest possible perspective, it is *imperative* to fund proven interventions. Time and time again, the evidence has demonstrated that family planning is a wise investment. If we are serious about saving women's lives, family planning must remain at the center of the agenda.

Bill and Melinda are encouraged by a string of recent developments that suggest the paradox of family planning is beginning to be resolved.

In the last two years, the United States Government has increased funding for international family planning by \$200 million. It has also re-funded the UN Population Fund. Among countries with a high unmet need for family planning, Malawi and Rwanda have demonstrated how political commitment can achieve results quickly. Those promising trends should encourage other donors and other countries with high unmet need to follow suit.

I hope the United Nations, through the UN Population Fund, will lead this revitalization of family planning. And I pledge the Gates Foundation's support in the effort to meet the unmet need for family planning among hundreds of millions of women in the developing world. Ultimately, that is the most appropriate way for Bill and Melinda to thank you for the tremendous honor of the Population Award, to continue being your partner in this essential work.

In that spirit, Bill and Melinda have decided that the foundation will match the prize money for this award and make a grant for the total amount to the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development, to help it continue the outstanding work for which it has been recognized today.

Thank you.