Family planning has been one of the biggest development and public health successes of the second half of the 20th Century. It has saved millions of lives of women and children and has changed the face of the world.

Today, 63 per cent of women of reproductive age in developing countries use a method of family planning. That’s an impressive achievement considering that in 1960 that number was just 10 per cent.

Speaking at the International Conference on Family Planning, Kampala, Uganda, Werner Harug, Director of Technical Division, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), stated that 15 years ago in Cairo in 1994, 179 countries bolstered by civil society, took historic steps forward at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), “They defined reproductive rights as human rights, recognized sexual health as a component of reproductive health, and called for universal access to reproductive healthcare by 2015.

“The ICPD vision includes equality between women and men in reproductive decision-making, voluntary choice in determining the number and timing of one’s children, and freedom from sexual violence, coercion, discrimination and other harmful practices.

The ICPD sought to explain family planning in a more comprehensive vision of reproductive health in contrast with narrowly focused, demographically motivated programmes. It succeeded but unintentionally belittled family planning and its positive contributions for development.

“Family planning is the best documented practice to reduce maternal mortality. Ensuring access to modern contraceptives has the potential to reduce maternal deaths by up to 40 per cent. The benefit of family planning in Beijing, China in 1995, issues of reproductive health, family planning as well as matters of gender were brought very much to the fore, to the attention of our governments and to the attention of the international community. In particular, the persistent high maternal and infant mortality and morbidity rates continue to be major concerns especially in our developing countries. With increasing knowledge especially through research, overtime, we have come to gain better information and insights regarding the causes and underlying conditions that continue to undermine the health status of our women and children.

“Mortality rates of both mothers and children in developing countries like Uganda continue to be unacceptably high. This is a well known fact. It is also true that the causes of death among our women and children are well known and are all largely preventable. Furthermore, low cost or relatively cheap cost-effective technologies to prevent this tragedy also exist. We, therefore, have a solemn responsibility to ensure that women do not continue to die from preventable conditions whose remedies are available to us. We cannot just sit back and watch as our women continue to die so needlessly in pregnancy and childbirth. That is the challenge we have today. No woman should die while giving life.

“Uganda’s efforts to improve the health of mothers and children have not been as successful as we would like to see. No woman should die while giving life. The tribulations and frustrations that our women face in pregnancy and childbirth are many. As patron of Safe Motherhood in Uganda, I have seen for myself the major challenge we have at hands.

“We believe that investing in maternal, child and family health will surely yield high returns for the country in the future.

“The situation maternal health and child survival in Uganda inclusive, remains a cause for concern. I have spoken on numerous
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"Family planning is the best documented practice to reduce maternal mortality. Ensuring access to modern contraceptives has the potential to reduce maternal deaths by up to 40 per cent. The benefit of family planning is substantial. Each year, modern contraceptives prevent 2.7 million needless infant deaths and the loss of 60 million years of healthy life," he said.

However, despite all that has been achieved, family planning is still an incomplete agenda. Today, more than 200 million women count on safe and effective family planning methods, but are unable to do so because they lack access to information and services or the support of their husbands and communities. An estimated 75 million women in developing countries have unintended pregnancies each year and almost 20 million women undergo unsafe abortion.

In her speech, First Lady of Uganda, Mrs. Janet Museveni noted that family planning is one of the four factors that reduce maternal mortality.

According to her, "Evidence from research shows that there are four pillars to reduce maternal mortality: antenatal care, emergency obstetric care; skilled attendance at birth; and family planning.

"We are all aware that among the existing, effective, low cost technologies to prevent unnecessary maternal death is family planning. The essence is to help couples plan for the next child as the mother recovers from the previous stressful pregnancy and labour. Family planning reduces maternal deaths by avoiding risky pregnancies that are the too early, or too many, or too close or too late.

"Family planning needs to be promoted as a key strategy in reducing maternal mortality at different levels. At the individual level, family planning reduces the number of times a woman becomes pregnant and women with need is to be more focused.

"You will recall that following the 1987 Safe Motherhood International Conference in Nairobi, Kenya and the landmark International Conference on Population and Development which took place in 1994 in Cairo, Egypt, as well as the Women's Summit which took place..."