Effective family planning is key to millennium goals, experts say

By Wole Oyejide

AHEAD of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, experts in family and reproductive health have reiterated that effective family planning programs can make a significant contribution to breaking the cycle of poverty, reduce maternal mortality and achieve universal reproductive health for all.

They emphasized that child spacing can reduce mortality as a result of pregnancy and labour. It would also reduce economic burden on poor families and allow parents to invest more in each child’s care and school. Thereby improving family nutrition, education levels and living standards, as targeted by MDGs.

On the contrary, rapid population growth would mean adverse pressure on environment, including water supply, soil erosion and global climate change at large. It also has consequences for human capital investments in education and health that are needed to provide the new generations with the necessary skills, ahead of meeting the MDGs.

Speaking at the recently concluded international conference on family planning, held in Kampala, Uganda, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Director of Technical Division, Dr. Werner Haug, said family planning is one of the most cost effective interventions in development. He said: “Family planning is the best documented practice to reduce maternal mortality, as it is critical in preventing unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions. Ensuring access to modern contraceptives has the potential to reduce maternal deaths by up to 40 per cent. The benefits of family planning are substantial. Each year, modern contraceptives prevent 2.7 million needless infant deaths and the loss of 60 million years of healthy life. Family planning is also instrumental in preventing morbidities such as obstetric fistula and lowering transmission of HIV. Currently over 90 percent of infants and young children with HIV are thought to have been infected by their parents.

“Meeting the need for family planning among women with HIV infection, and in communities where there is a generalized HIV epidemic will prevent a large share of new infections... Voluntary family planning is also about empowering women. When women are healthy and empowered, they are able to deliver for their families, communities and nations. Their new born are more likely to survive and their children thrive, creating a better life for all,” Haug said.

The experts observed that despite all that had been achieved, family planning is still an incomplete agenda. A communiqué issued by department of population, family reproductive health, Bill and Melinda Gates Institute of population and reproductive health, expresses that more than 200 million women want to use safe and effective family planning methods, but are unable to do so as 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. Despite decades of research and programmatic experience with successful family planning programs, global attention to this health and funding for family planning programs, risking couples’ ability to time and space their births to their families’ benefit.”

It added that: “With the largest generation of adolescents in history entering their reproductive years, it is estimated that the requirements to meet family planning demand will grow by 40 per cent by mid-century. Adolescents and youth are becoming sexually active at a younger age. Voluntary or not, they are at greater risk of HIV and unwanted pregnancy. While noting this, we must also remember that we must see young people not as beneficiaries of our aspirations, but as shapers of their own dreams and futures, and partners in development. We all have an obligation to tap into their knowledge and capacities, and fully involve them in the response to the challenges before us.”

Haug added that a lot more still beckons to complement the existing Maputo plan of Action for Sexual and reproductive Health and rights 2007-2010. The action plan acknowledges that comprehensive reproductive health, including family planning is core to the African developmental agenda. He said: “We must match this growing momentum with growth in resources. It is clear that leadership and resources will mean the difference between success and failure.

“An additional dollar invested in voluntary family planning comes back at least four times in saved expenses. It would cost the world 23 billion dollars per year to stop women from having unintended pregnancies and dying in childbirth, and to save millions of newborns, less than 10 days of global military spending. If the MDGs are to be met, the international community must restore family planning to the top of the development agenda. That will require both political and financial commitment,” he said.