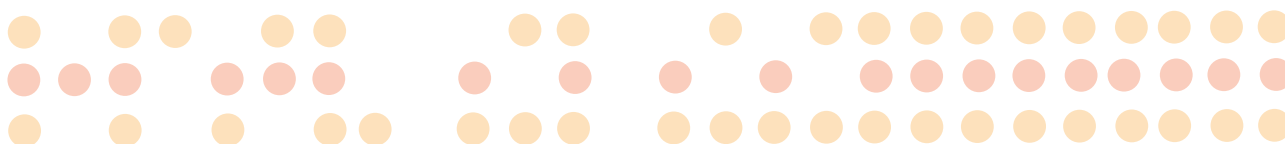


NEWSLETTER

UNFPA SIERRA LEONE

JANURARY - JUNE 2021

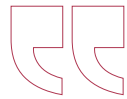


Message from the Officer-in-Charge



JOCELYN FENARD
OFFICER-IN-CHARGE,
UNFPA SIERRA LEONE

Welcome to our January - June edition of the UNFPA Sierra Leone newsletter which attempts to give our readers a synopsis of what has been achieved so far by the agency in 2021. This includes: the graduation of new midwives who are expected to help reduce the gap in the midwifery workforce in Sierra Leone, our support to the Government of Sierra Leone through the Ministry of Health and Sanitation with equipment that is critical in building a strong health care worker force, a retreat that was held for members of the Adolescent and Youth Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights taskforce and our efforts in Kabala where hubs will be established for easy access to sexual and reproductive health information and access to contraceptives for adolescent girls.

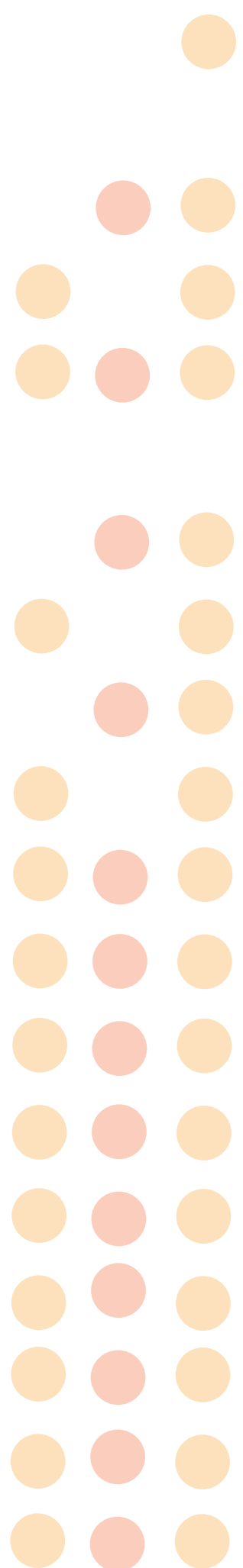


Meeting the country's development goals

We also look at how we partnered with the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development and Statistics Sierra Leone to celebrate this year's World Population Day on the theme 'My body is my own: Claiming the right to autonomy and self-determination'.

As the United Nations reproductive health and rights agency, in all our work, we support the Government of Sierra Leone in meeting the country's development goals. We provide all-inclusive technical support to implement programmes and improve knowledge around sexual and reproductive health, gender equality, population issues and adolescents and youth.

Our work in Sierra Leone is guided by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, especially in bringing an end to preventable maternal deaths, the unmet need for family planning and violence and harmful practices against women and girls. It is our view that this newsletter will provide you with vital information on what we have been doing in supporting adolescents and young people, and other key areas of interventions for cohesive sexual and reproductive health services.



New graduate midwives will help reduce the gap in the midwifery workforce

The National School of Midwifery, on 30 January 2021, held its thirty-fourth graduation ceremony for 102 state-certified midwives after they completed 18 months of intensive training in midwifery. The theme for this year's graduation ceremony was 'Midwives with Women: Celebrate, Demonstrate, Mobilise and Unite – Our time is now!'

Since 2010, UNFPA continues to support the schools of midwifery in Bo, Freetown and Makeni to increase the number of competent midwives to address the gap in the midwifery workforce. Effective clinical teaching is vital to developing a competent nursing and midwifery workforce whose practice contributes to building a strong health service for optimal public protection.

From an initial 95 practicing midwives in 2009, the country now has over 3,382 midwives contributing to national development. In 2020, UNFPA supported the training of 1,197 midwives in Sierra Leone. In the same year, with funds from the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, through the Saving Lives in Sierra Leone Programme, UNFPA supported the Ministry of Health and Sanitation in developing the Preceptorship Policy and Implementation Guidelines, an approach and a concept that is globally accepted and commonly practised to achieve clinical competency.

From 2013 to 2019, Sierra Leone has made major improvements in maternal health indicators,



particularly in the reduction of maternal mortality by almost 40 per cent. As highlighted in the 2013 Demographic and Health Survey, there were 1,165 deaths per 100,000 live births compared to 717 deaths per 100,000 live births in the 2019 Demographic and Health Survey. The country has also witnessed a substantial increase in the percentage of skilled birth attendants from 60 per cent in 2013 to 87 per cent in 2019.

Delivering his remarks at the graduation ceremony, Stephen Mupeta, UNFPA's Maternal Health Technical Specialist, said, "Maternal mortality remains high in the country and we should not be complacent. We have a long way to go to reduce maternal mortality to less than 70 deaths per 100,000 live births as contained in the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development."

UNFPA's commitment to supporting the midwifery programme in Sierra Leone over the last 10 years, in collaboration with other development partners, has led to the graduation of just over 1,000 additional midwives who have been deployed to various health facilities across the country. With the current number of approximately 150 midwives graduating each year, Sierra Leone may not reach the required 3,000 plus midwives to meet the international standards for a midwifery workforce. Calls have therefore been made for Government to triple the production of midwives in the next few years.

UNFPA-trained midwife promotes safe motherhood, save mothers

"Serving a hard to reach community like Alikalia comes with a lot of challenges. The good thing, however, is my contribution in promoting safe motherhood and in reducing maternal mortality which I am proud of as a midwife," said Regina Conteh, a midwife attached to the Alikalia Community Health Post, Koinadugu district, north of Sierra Leone.

With 717 deaths per 100,000 live births, according to the 2019 Demographic and Health Survey, Sierra Leone is still among countries with the world's highest maternal mortality ratio.

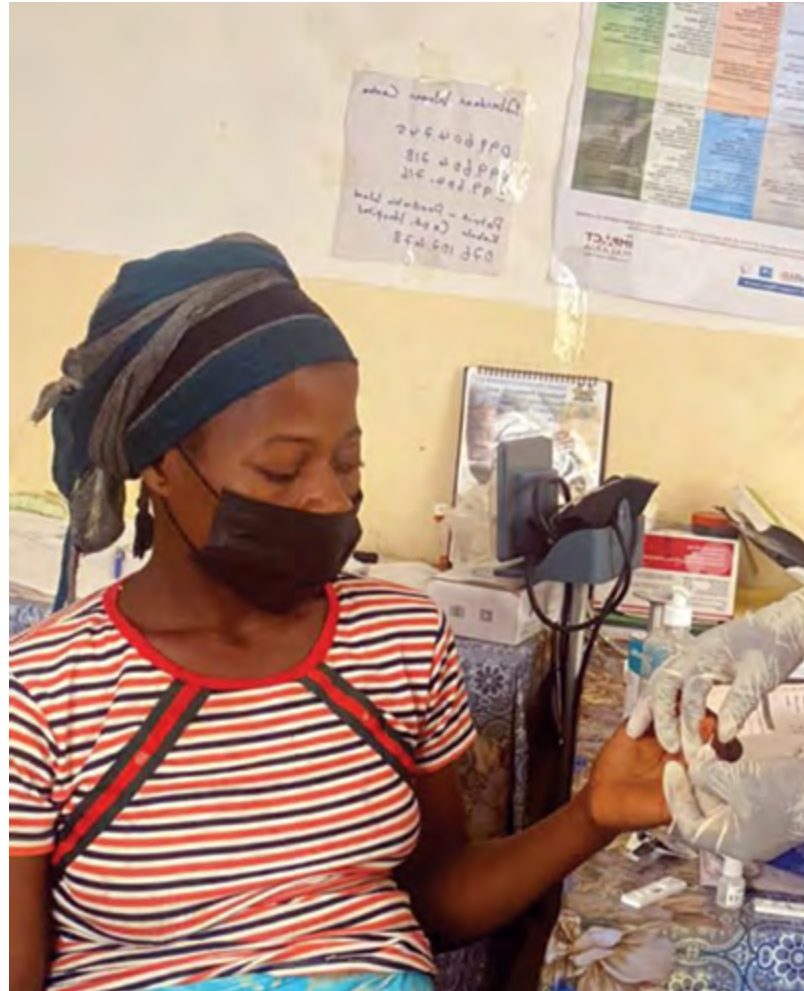
Midwives remain the basis of UNFPA's work in achieving the three transformative goals of zero preventable maternal deaths, zero unmet need for family planning and zero gender-based violence and harmful practices against women and girls.

With funding from UK aid, UNFPA, through the Saving Lives Programme, supports the Government of Sierra Leone in training midwives in the three schools of midwifery (Freetown, Makeni and Bo), to improve the availability of skilled birth attendants as well as to help reduce the gap in the country's midwifery workforce.

Regina Conteh is a midwife trained at the School of Midwifery in Makeni. By 2012, as a State Enrolled Community Health Nurse, she served at the Community Health Post at Matotoka where she witnessed women losing their lives giving birth to their babies, something that pushed her to enrol in 2017 to become a midwife.

"This [midwifery] came with a lot of challenges," she explained, adding that "it, however, was a way one could contribute in promoting safe motherhood and in saving lives of mothers and babies." Reflecting on the numerous trainings she got, she said, "The trainings at the school of midwifery are largely contributing to my work in successfully saving lives."

With no maternal mortality reported since 2019 when she was posted to the Alikalia Community Health Post, Regina believes this is due to the significance attached to the quick referral of major cases. "When a case is detected to be serious at the antenatal care stage, we immediately do a referral to the Kabala Government Hospital. This is sometimes difficult especially given the terrible road network."



Delivering babies comes with required skills and expertise and this is more so with twins or quadruplets. In September 2020, Regina successfully delivered quadruplets, the first midwife to have done so.

A pregnant mother, Bondo Thoronka, arrived at the Community Health Post for health care services but was referred to the Kabala Government Hospital. "She failed to travel to Kabala as advised. Days later, she came to the facility, fully dilated. There was no ambulance. In a bid to save her and the babies, I used the skills I was taught at the School of Midwifery to deliver her," a proud Regina narrated, and added that, "delivering that pregnancy was a lifetime experience."

With bleeding in pregnancy accounting for about 40 per cent of maternal deaths in Sierra Leone, Regina was worried about possible postnatal complications like bleeding which has the potential to lead to death.



"This was my major concern. I couldn't sleep as I was constantly monitoring her and the quadruplets. It turned out to be one big success. Today the mother and her four babies are all alive," said Regina.

Community advocacy is critical to ending preventable maternal deaths. When Regina was first posted to the community, she felt like returning. "When I first arrived, there were cultural challenges too, added to the fact that it was my first time coming here. Changing the mentality of people was a problem; more so, getting women to visit the health facility to deliver babies."

There was a high number of home deliveries by traditional birth attendants (TBAs) who lacked the required skills and medical equipment to ensure safe delivery, contributing to women dying during childbirth.

"I developed a scheme wherein, when a TBA brings to the health facility a pregnant woman, some amount of money is given to her as transport fare. It was a difficult drive but it helped to create impact. Now, we get huge turnout of pregnant women visiting the facility daily with a minimum of 20 deliveries a month."

Looking back, Regina, who by midday of Friday, 23 April, had received over a dozen women for maternal health care services, said that working in a Community Health Post she never knew was a challenge especially being the only midwife with a Community Health Assistant.

"We lack the infrastructure and tools. There is need for more support. However, I am happy to be serving the community and helping in promoting safe motherhood by conducting antenatal clinic, clean and safe deliveries, detecting complications and doing referrals and eventually contributing in reducing maternal mortality rates, thanks to the UNFPA and donor support."



The trainings at the school of midwifery are largely contributing to my work in successfully saving lives



Healthcare providers trained in cervical cancer screening and management

Cervical cancer remains a major public health problem, ranking as the second most common cancer among women in Sierra Leone. In April, UNFPA trained 50 health providers in cervical cancer screening and management of cervical pre-cancers. The aim was to build their capacity in cervical cancer screening and treatment in order to create a strong pool of public health care workers with the needed skills.

The training was made possible with funds from the Government of the People's Republic of China, a major donor partner to the UNFPA Sierra Leone Country Office. The partnership between the two countries is geared towards building a resilient team of public health care workers with the needed skills

to provide emergency obstetric and newborn care and screen and manage cervical cancer.

Under the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund (SSCAF), the People's Republic of China in 2019 committed US\$2 million to reduce maternal deaths and prevent and treat cervical cancer in Sierra Leone.

The training provides an opportunity for clinicians, doctors and other health workers to learn how to screen people using very simple methods and easy to get materials, and be able to identify people who are at risk of cervical cancer.

Dr. Francis Moses, Reproductive Health and Family Planning Programme Manager, Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MoHS)

said, "Many of our women in Sierra Leone die of cervical cancer and they don't even know that it is what they have. It has been quite some time that as a ministry we have been trying to set up a national cervical cancer screening programme."

Sister Edwina Conteh, Head of the Reproductive and Family Planning Unit of the King Harman Maternal and Child Hospital said, "Most women are knowledgeable about breast cancer which is easy to identify. However, for cervical cancer, it takes time for someone to know. The training should therefore help in capacitating us so as to get more women and girls to come forward to be screened which will help in saving lives."

Government supported with equipment critical in building a strong health care worker force



In a bid to build a strong team of health care workers, UNFPA donated to the MoHS medical equipment critical to supporting the provision of emergency obstetric and newborn care (EmONC) services and in the screening and management of cervical cancer. The equipment donated include cryotherapy apparatus, carbon dioxide gas cylinders, foetal dopplers, hemocue, sterilizers, vaginal speculums and forceps of different types and sizes, instrument trays and gynecological models.

The donation was made possible with funding from the People's Republic of China under the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund. UNFPA continues to work with the Government of Sierra Leone in providing maternal and newborn health services including EmONC, family planning services for women and girls, and other sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. The support covers nine health care facilities where cervical cancer screening and treatment facilities have been established, with Reproductive Health Centres equipped by UNFPA to provide comprehensive reproductive health services.



Yearly, 512 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer in Sierra Leone and 372 die from the disease with the country ranking 22 in the world with age-adjusted death rate of 22.47 per 100,000. The support by UNFPA to establish cervical cancer screening and treatment services in public health facilities will make services accessible to women and help prevent avoidable deaths. It also will help reduce avoidable morbidity and mortality related to childbirth. It also will contribute to the reduction of the country's maternal mortality ratio which is among the highest in the world, at 717 per 100,000 live births.

Fistula day observed in Bo, southern Sierra Leone

Obstetric fistula is a disturbing childbirth injury wherein a hole develops between the birth canal and the urinary bladder and/or rectum resulting in constant leakage of urine or faeces. The presence of this condition often signifies the failure of the health system to provide quality health care during childbirth.

The International Day to End Obstetric Fistula provides an opportunity for countries to advocate for strategic partnerships, mobilize resources and campaign for interventions aimed at ending fistula. The theme for this year's commemoration was 'Women's rights are human rights! End Fistula now!'

Sierra Leone is estimated to have 2,400 women living with obstetric fistula and is among the 55 nations participating in the global campaign launched in 2003. In 2020, with support from the Government of Iceland, UNFPA worked with Aberdeen Women Centre and Haikal Foundation and successfully screened 260 women of which 129 were found to have obstetric fistula that was successfully repaired amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Thirty-one women received skills development from UNFPA through Haikal Foundation as part of the social re-integration activities.

In partnership with the MoHS, Haikal Foundation and Aberdeen Women Centre, and with funding support from the Government of Iceland, this year's event took place in Bo, southern Sierra Leone, on 27 May 2021, with a high-level panel

discussion on fistula.

The funding support that the Government of Iceland and other partners are providing to the United Nations Population Fund Country Office in Sierra Leone is of strategic value to the work that the agency does in improving the quality of SRH services, including end obstetric fistula and ultimately reducing the number of maternal deaths.



Sierra Leone is estimated to have 2,400 women living with obstetric fistula



UNFPA holds retreat for AYSRHR Taskforce

In April 2021, UNFPA organized a three-day retreat for the Adolescent and Youth Sexual & Reproductive Health and Rights (AYSRHR) Taskforce, established by the Country Office to serve as a mechanism to enhance teamwork to deliver better on SRH challenges facing young people.

The overall objective of that retreat was to create a common, realistic and actionable understanding of how the taskforce can actualize their mandate in a bid to contribute to UNFPA's overall goal in Sierra Leone, which would lead to the reduction of adolescent pregnancy and early marriage.

UNFPA's key interventions to empower adolescents and youth in Sierra Leone cover a range of

services that include providing life skills to young people, comprehensive sexuality education, youth-friendly health services and safe spaces. These measures are all designed to reduce teenage pregnancy and maternal deaths, as well as to support livelihoods, develop capacity, build personal knowledge, and encourage social environments that will promote good health and personal safety.

Teenage pregnancy is still a major public health problem in Sierra Leone and the gaps in access to information and SRH services for adolescent girls remain high. The task force on AYSRHR will support the engagement of adolescents and youth in leadership, advocacy, policy formulation and programming for integrated SRH services.

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Targeting adolescent and young girls through AYSRHR Hubs



Twenty-eight per cent of girls between 15 and 19 years have begun childbearing

In May, UNFPA visited Kabala in Koinadugu District, northern Sierra Leone. The visit was to support the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs and other partners in consulting stakeholders to build consensus on the identification of spaces to establish hubs for easy access to SRH information and access to contraceptives by adolescent girls.

Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy in the world. Twenty-eight per cent of girls between 15 and 19 years have begun childbearing, according to the Demographic and Health Survey 2019. There is evidence that this high rate is fuelled by a diverse set of drivers including lack of information, knowledge and skills, weak institutions and services, poverty and girls' limited access to assets and widespread sexual violence and exploitation.

However, programming in this area has mostly focused on a limited set of intervention with major access barriers, notably SRH information, access to contraceptives, and mentoring and life skills training for girls.

Recognizing this gap between the complexity of drivers and the limitations in the scope of responses, UNFPA is working in close partnership with the line Ministries to support the multisectoral approaches enshrined in the National Strategy for the Reduction of Adolescent Pregnancy and Child Marriage.

The establishment of AYSRHR Hubs, for both in-school and out-of-school girls, will promote access to SRH information and integrated gender-based violence services.

UNFPA supports the development of an integrated health supply chain strategy



With funding from the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and UNFPA Supplies programme, the United Nations Population Fund supported the Ministry of Health and Sanitation in developing a national integrated health supply chain strategy to serve as a guideline for priority areas over the next five years to all supply chain players in the country.

The development of the National Health Supply Chain Strategic Plan is intended to guide the full realization of several policy guides and sector strategic plan objectives requiring a strong public health supply chain. The plan will help guide investments and coordinate the efforts of all stakeholders involved in the country's health supply chain space. It will also serve as a road map to guide the MoHS, the Directorate of Pharmaceutical Services and the National Medical Supplies Agency to coordinate the health supply chain strategies and the means of achieving its desired outcomes within a specified time frame.



Reproductive Health Commodity Security, a key component to the national health supply chain strategy, plays a critical role in ensuring that Sierra Leone achieves its national health goals as contained in the Medium Term National Development Plan (2019-2023), the Sustainable Development Goals and the International Conference on Population and Development commitments.

The availability of lifesaving maternal and child-health related medicines and supplies to the last mile depends largely on a robust and well-functioning supply chain management system. A nationally integrated supply chain strategy should serve as a common framework for well-coordinated, well-aligned and harmonized planning, implementation, performance monitoring and reporting of supply chain interventions that ensure delivery of pharmaceuticals and health technology products to those in need.

The need for enhanced data management to inform effective planning and programme implementation along the entire length of the supply chain system, the rational use of medicines and strengthened coordination mechanisms as reflected in the National Health Sector Strategic Plan and the National Medicines Policy, is critical.

UNFPA and partners commemorate World Population Day

Working in partnership with the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development and Statistics Sierra Leone, UNFPA celebrated this year's World Population Day on the theme 'My body is my own: Claiming the right to autonomy and self-determination'.

This year's celebration, which took place at the Atlantic Hotel in Freetown, focused on popularizing and raising awareness of the State of the World Population-SoWP Report, the International Conference on Population Development-ICPD commitments, Demographic Dividend, the National Population Policy (NPP 2019) and the 2019 Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (2019 SLDHS). These are critical to providing data for the status of women's health and rights.

UNFPA's global statement on the subject underlined that many justifications and theories had been put forward to justify depriving women and girls of their rights and choices and for making their bodies subject to the whims of others. It also stressed that "if these excuses are allowed to continue, none of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals will be achieved by 2030. And that means the potential for human, social and economic progress envisioned by the international community in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development would go unrealized to everyone's detriment."

Jocelyn Fenard, Officer-In-Charge of UNFPA Sierra Leone underscored the fact that "making bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights a reality would require the establishment of a new partnership amongst the Government, the United Nations, development partners, civil society and the private sector to promote the rights of all women and adolescent girls. This is the main purpose of our presence here today."



The UN Resident Coordinator, Babatunde A. Ahonsi, in his statement said that every woman had the right to make her own choices about her SRH. "What leads to healthy and productive societies is when women can make informed choices about their SRH, and when they have access to services to support their choices. A woman who has control over her body gains not only in terms of autonomy but also through advances in health and education, income and safety. She is more likely to thrive, and so is her family. However, whilst the theme of this year's World Population Day commemoration is 'My body is my own', the question still lingers on how many women and girls can freely make that claim."

The Deputy Minister of Planning and Economic Development, Jonathan Titus-Williams, said the Government had been working to address existing gender challenges, mostly those related to reproductive health and rights, and improving population planning and management.



Launching the SWoP Report, the Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs, Hon. Manty Tarawallie, said the theme was aligned with the National Population Policy, the 2019 Demographic and Health Survey, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Africa Union Agenda 2063. Government, she said, remained committed to fulfilling the overall goal of ending gender-based violence and harmful practices, ending unmet need for family planning services and ending preventable maternal deaths by 2030.

On the 25th anniversary of the International Conference on Population Development in Nairobi, Sierra Leone committed to reducing the unmet need for family planning from 24.8 per cent in 2019 by 20 per cent in 2025, reducing the maternal mortality of 1,165 per 100,000 live births by 50 per cent in 2028, enacting the Prohibition of Child Marriage Bill which will criminalize child marriage for all types of

marriages by the end of 2020, and providing an inclusive platform for a broad range of stakeholders to come together around the universally applicable principle of rights and choices for all.

According to the 2021 SoWP Report, half of the women living in 57 developing countries are denied the right to choose their sex partners and to decide when to bear children through the use of contraceptives. They also lack the power to make a decision about their body without the fear of violence.

Moderating this year's event was Nicky Spencer-Coker, a barrister and solicitor of the High Court of Sierra Leone and an inspirational advocate for the empowerment of women and girls, always willing to serve in their interests. She is also Head of Advocacy and Movement Building at Purposeful - Sierra Leone.

Stakeholders meet on the 2021 Voluntary National Review (VNR) for Sierra Leone

In June, UNFPA held a two-day national consultation with stakeholders, in order to position UNFPA's three transformative results – delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled – into the 2021 Voluntary National Review (VNR) Report for Sierra Leone. The consultative engagement also discussed the country's progress in meeting the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) commitments.

The VNR is a report done by countries to track progress made on the Sustainable Development Goals and other development indicators. This year's presentation of the VNR is the third by Sierra Leone, since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015.

One of the goals of the SDGs is to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for everyone at all ages. This goal seeks to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health care, reduce global maternal death rates and bring an end to the HIV/AIDS epidemic by 2030.

This goal is in line with the ICPD commitments of allocating 1 per cent of the country's health budget to family planning specific budget; increasing the number of adolescents reached with modern contraceptive methods; training and employing 1,000 midwives, 180 nurse anaesthetists and 72 surgical assistants by 2025 and reducing maternal mortality from 1,165 per 100,000 live births by 50 per cent in 2028.

Speaking at the event, Director of Planning and Research, Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, Sheka Bangura said the country was fully committed to meeting the ICPD commitments as these are closely linked to the country's Mid-Term National Development Plan (2019-2023) and the National Population Policy (2019) in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Sierra Leone's key achievements include the reduction in maternal mortality from 1,165 to 717 deaths per 100,000 live births, reducing adolescent birth rates from 125.1/1,000 (2013) to 101/1,000 and reducing the unmet need for family planning from 24.8 per cent for all women to 21 per cent (DHS 2019).

With support from UNFPA, the country has also trained and employed 275 midwives, 26 nurse anaesthetists and 18 surgical assistants since the ICPD commitment was made.

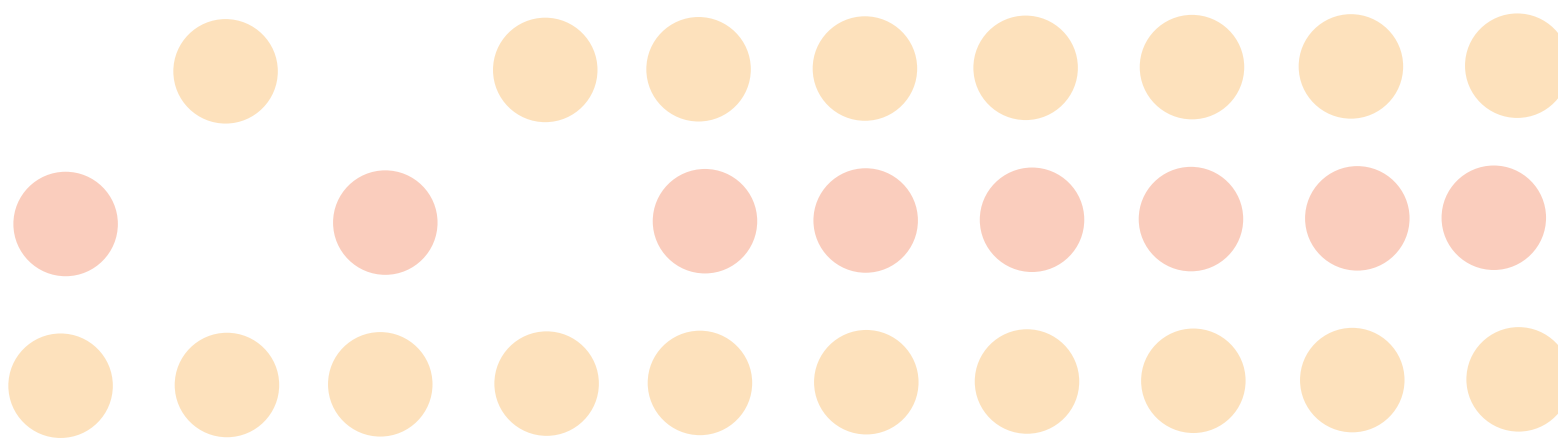
The 13th Inquiry, which is a global data collection on the SDGs and other development indicators, was also undertaken, providing a chance to increase UNFPA data coverage for SDG 5.6.2. that deals with achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls.



AT WORK

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