

Getting a Bigger Bang for Our Global Health Bucks With Front-Line Workers

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In a remote Ethiopian village, a front-line health worker dedicated to helping mothers deliver their babies uses the most sophisticated piece of medical equipment she can find: a flashlight. In the darkness of a single-room home, she clenches it between her teeth as she helps bring a newborn safely into this world.

But not all newborns are so fortunate. Annually around the globe, 1 million newborns die needlessly on their first day of life, according to Save the Children's 14th annual "State of the World's Mothers" report. One year after 173 countries pledged to end child mortality in a generation, it is clear a greater focus on frontline health workers is necessary to achieve that.

As Save the Children's report shows, many babies could be saved with basic equipment and drugs costing \$1 to \$6. But too often there is no trained and supplied health worker to deliver even the most basic care before, during and after birth. This reflects a much larger challenge to a world facing declining, but still large, numbers of maternal and child deaths, a continuing AIDS crisis, widespread malnutrition and the rise of chronic diseases in developing countries.

Americans should feel proud of the incredible global health advances the United States has led. From discovering new vaccines and treatments to battle childhood disease to providing antiretroviral drugs to roll back the global AIDS crisis, American investments have saved millions of lives.

But we can do even more with our modest but impactful global health investments. These make up a fraction of our development and humanitarian funding, which itself is less than 1 percent of the federal budget. Yet, a greater focus on training and equipping health workers means we could reach more of the most vulnerable children and families with solutions that already exist.

In rural Indonesia, expectant mothers such as Syafrina rely on the skills of midwives such as Desita. Desita recently saved Syafrina's newborn, who couldn't breathe upon birth. Using a tube, Desita cleared the baby's airways. "Finally she cried!" Desita said. "We all felt so happy and relieved!"

Front-line health workers like Desita are often the first and only link to health care for millions of mothers and babies in the developing world. They provide a range of lifesaving prevention and treatment services where they are most needed. Many front-line health workers visit babies and moms at home to ensure essential newborn care to reduce infections, support breast-feeding and identify problems needing attention.

Thanks in part to our country's support for global health initiatives, child deaths have dropped 40 percent in the past two decades and maternal mortality rates have been cut in half. Last June at

the Child Survival Call to Action held in Washington, D.C., U.S. leaders stood with global peers and pledged to end preventable child deaths by 2035.

A number of countries, including co-hosts India and Ethiopia, have since taken important steps to authorize lower-level health workers to deliver lifesaving care — such as injectable antibiotics to treat deadly newborn infections. But a global health worker shortage and lack of training for existing health workers are severely limiting the effect of such decisions. Nearly 7 million children still die from largely preventable causes yearly. Three million of them are newborn babies.

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