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Measuring progress in reducing maternal mortality

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The need to monitor progress in reducing maternal mortality has a long history, which can be traced back to the 1700s in some parts of the Western world. Today, however, this need is felt most acutely in developing countries, where the priority is to stimulate, evaluate and sustain action to prevent these essentially avoidable deaths. Over the last two decades, considerable efforts have been made to understand and overcome the measurement challenges of maternal

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mortality in the context of weak information systems, and new and enhanced methods and tools have emerged.

Key words: developing countries; maternal deaths; maternal mortality; measurement; methods; progress; tools.

INTRODUCTION

Today, the desire to show progress in reducing the burden of mortality is universal: across developing and developed countries; at international, national and local levels; and for all causes and conditions. What is also universal is the challenge this presents. Capturing deaths and assigning causes is not straightforward, and this alone makes showing changes – increases or decreases – problematic.¹ Two-thirds of the world's population reside where routine registration of deaths is missing, and for the remaining third, misclassification of particular causes or circumstances can sometimes lead to spurious trends and conclusions about progress.² It is important to acknowledge this wider reality of mortality measurement even when specific sub-groups are the focus of attention. In this chapter, the focus is on maternal mortality and a reminder of the wider challenge is particularly relevant. Measuring maternal mortality is often regarded as one of the most problematic outcomes to track, especially in developing countries.³ There certainly are significant challenges, but also many distinctive characteristics to maternal deaths, which aid reporting and measurement, as illustrated later. The aim of our paper is to introduce the various approaches that are possible in different country settings, and so illustrate the comparative wealth of opportunities for measuring maternal mortality. Why is this illustration important now?

2007 marked the twentieth anniversary year of the international Safe Motherhood Initiative, which was launched to galvanize action to reduce maternal mortality.⁴ 2007/08 also marks the mid-point to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), one of which – MDG5 – will be judged on the basis of a 75% reduction in maternal mortality by 2015.⁵ Together, these events have shone a spotlight on the weaknesses of existing statistics, nationally and thus internationally, on the magnitude and trends in maternal mortality. Ironically, the weaknesses are often discussed together with apparent conclusions that no progress has been made and that MDG5 is 'off-track'.⁶ Confusing 'no progress' with 'no measurement of progress' is the fundamental problem here, as is confusing 'no options for measurement' and 'no resources to do so'. Such confusions have repercussions at local, national and international levels, leading in the extreme to disillusionment and disinvestment in actions to reduce these deaths, because 'what you count is what you do'.⁷ Currently, there are indeed no standardized methods and sources for measuring maternal mortality that can be universally applied and are universally reliable for the purposes of international monitoring of maternal mortality. This does not, however, mean that at subnational and national levels there are no options for measurement. There is currently a high demand and need within countries to measure maternal mortality to stimulate, evaluate and sustain action to prevent these essentially avoidable deaths.

This chapter synthesizes the published literature and draws on key resource materials (Box 1) to present the current range of measurement options, and to highlight the scope for further improvement and innovation. The definitions and common

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