



## **Launch of the Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health (MNCH) Project**

**Bangalore, 8 January, 2010:** With the growing recognition that the less developed districts of Northern Karnataka require special attention, the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) announced today a five year programme to improve Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health (MNCH). Developed under the leadership of the Mission Director, National Rural Health Mission, Government of Karnataka; the project will be implemented in partnership with Karnataka Health Promotion Trust (KHPT), in association with the University of Manitoba, Canada. The five-year, eight million dollar technical assistance initiative is being supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Partners associated with this initiative include St. John's Medical College, IntraHealth and Karuna Trust.

The MNCH project will strengthen existing government health responses towards improving maternal, newborn and child health in Bagalkot, Bijapur, Yadgir, Gulbarga, Bidar, Koppal, Raichur and Bellary. The strategy will focus on expanding availability and accessibility of critical health interventions for rural populations, improving their quality and coverage, and also increasing demand for maternal and neonatal health care services.

Karnataka is a large state in southern India divided into 30 administrative districts. From the 2001 census, the population is estimated at approximately 55 million, and 66% of the population is rural. Although the overall health system and health status in Karnataka is better than many Indian states, there is substantial heterogeneity across the state's regions. There are large inter-district variations, particularly between northern and southern districts, in all aspects of development, including health. There is lower coverage of antenatal care, institutional deliveries, early post-natal care and childhood immunization in northern Karnataka. This project will help in understanding the MNCH needs in Karnataka, and in developing innovative strategies to address them.

Explaining the thrust of NRHM, Mr. S Selvakumar, IAS, Mission Director, NRHM, stated that *“Although the focus of NRHM is large scale and its aim is to extend health services to rural areas, we realize the need for intensive and innovative projects that demonstrate qualitative processes for strengthening rural health systems to improve maternal, newborn and child health.”*

Speaking about the need to develop operational models that can be disseminated to other parts of the state, Dr. Stephen Moses, Country Director, University of Manitoba said that special care and focus on mother and child during pregnancy, around birth and in the neonatal period is essential. *“Having identified the critical steps such as systematic antenatal care and comprehensive counseling to pregnant women, followed by skilled care at birth, and the availability of emergency obstetric and new born care, the project will work closely with NRHM to select an appropriate set of interventions to prioritize for scaling up in Karnataka.”*

*“This project reflects the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s belief that each life has equal value. Despite India’s economic growth, the country continues to face high health burden in several areas. The government is showing increasing commitment to reverse and transform health outcomes. We are honoured to partner the Government of Karnataka’s efforts to improve maternal, neonatal and child health. Karnataka is emerging as an innovator in health. The lessons from this project would be relevant for the state and the country,”* said Hari Menon, Senior Programme Officer of Avahan, the India Initiative of Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The project will align with and support the National Rural Health Mission to improve service delivery through health workers and first referral health facilities in the eight districts. Components of this comprehensive intervention program include comprehensive antenatal care, providing skilled care at birth through trained midwives and physicians, and recognition and management of post-partum complications. The neonatal package will include counselling on vaccinations, breastfeeding advice, prevention and treatment of neonatal infections, and newborn care.

Speaking on the occasion, Mr. E. V. Ramana Reddy, Secretary, Health and Family Welfare said, *“In line with the NRHM’s objectives and approaches vis-à-vis maternal, neonatal and child health, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s (BMGF’s) Maternal and Neonatal Health Strategy seeks to improve MNCH outcomes in various parts of the world. Therefore, the BMGF can play a catalytic function by strategically partnering with the NRHM to support the development of technical strategies and innovative health delivery approaches to improve MNCH outcomes in India.”*

Dr James Blanchard, Director, Centre for Global Public Health, University of Manitoba, feels very privileged to be part of this initiative with Government of Karnataka and NRHM to develop a program that serves the families in Karnataka which will be a great example for the rest of India and the world.

It is expected that this focused initiative will provide crucial learning for the development of an innovative and operational MNCH model for NRHM that can be adopted across the state and India.

Speaking on the occasion, Mr. D. N. Nayak, Commissioner, Health and Family welfare services said, *“I think this is a great opportunity for the coming together of public and private partners to work jointly to improve the status of maternal, neonatal and child health in the state. The government has much strength in terms of reach and coverage of populations with its services, human and infrastructure resources, convergence of various programmes, etc. These strengths if complemented with evidence-based public health planning, upgraded quality of service packages that are client centric, and stringent monitoring systems, better enabled community ownership – the results can be far reaching.”*

Speaking on the rationale for the initiative Dr. B.M Ramesh, Project Director, MNCH project, Karnataka Health Promotion Trust said *“Critical interventions from the beginning of pregnancy through the first months of life have been shown to reduce morbidity and mortality to a great extent. We will work in close coordination with the NRHM team in Karnataka to identify the most appropriate and relevant interventions for implementation in the identified districts, which have traditionally weaker health structures and have lagged in improvements in MNCH outcomes.”*

Technical support will be provided to the NRHM at the state and district levels through development of joint plans for assessment, skill development, and project monitoring. The technical strategies will be implemented through the existing NRHM infrastructure in the eight districts and outcomes measured rigorously.

This new initiative in Karnataka offers a unique opportunity to use new and innovative health financing and service delivery models to improve maternal, neonatal and child health in Karnataka. The lessons from Karnataka will add to global knowledge in this area, said Prof Nandakumar, IAS (Retd.), Global Health and Development Policy, Brandeis University.

The Karnataka Health Promotion Trust (KHPT) was established in 2003 as a collaboration between the Government of Karnataka and the University of Manitoba, Canada. KHPT has been implementing HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support programs in Karnataka, Rajasthan, coastal Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, including a large HIV prevention and control project in Karnataka and southern Maharashtra, with the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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