UNFPA: Choice Not Chance

By Meghan DeYoung

As the world’s population passes 7 billion people and is projected to increase by another 1 billion by 2025, population has never been so influential (World Health Organization). With a rapid growth comes inevitable problems that all are affected by, both directly and indirectly.

The United Nation’s Population Fund, UNFPA, is one of the biggest contributors to solving the issues of population growth. Some of the major issues the UNFPA works to resolve might surprise some. When thinking of growth and the problems that inescapably follow, it is hard to imagine anything but difficulties associated with overcrowding and over population. But these are not the types of population issues that the UNFPA deals with. Instead, this UN agency focuses on improving areas such as female empowerment, abolition of female mutilation, promoting contraception use and making varieties available, improving access to reproductive and maternal health care, promoting female education, making family planning services available, addressing STI and STDs, and collecting population data.

The importance of the UNFPA’s work became apparent to me after I participated in the UN and Millennium Development Goals Study Tour this summer, from June 1st to June 7th 2013 in New York City. My fellow University of Wisconsin-Madison Global Health students and I had the opportunity to meet and discuss global health related issues with a UNFPA representative, which is how I discovered UNFPA’s sizable goal of solving population related problems occurring around the world.

The UNFPA works directly with countries’ governments to establish culturally relevant solutions to population issues. It never goes around a country’s government. Instead, it engages in a give-and-take process that requires patience on both sides to come to culturally relevant and sustainable solutions.

One of the UNFPA’s main focuses in the coming years leading up to the completion of the Millennium Development Goals in 2015 is that of spreading the idea of family planning as a human right, especially within developing countries where contraception, information and other essential family planning services are limited or nonexistent. The initiative is called the “Choice, Not Chance” campaign and is aimed at securing family planning services for the 222 million woman living in developing countries who do not have access and therefore cannot exercise this fundamental human right (UNFPA, 1). Even if the resources are available there might be cultural, social and economic norms that prevent women from taking advantage of the services.

The benefits of family planning are substantial. Simply by allowing women the option to space out their pregnancies by three to five years potentially lowers infant death by 46 percent (UNFPA, 2). Another study conducted showed that motherhood in adolescence lowers a girl's chance of receiving a diploma by 10 per cent as well as reduces her future income by $2,400 in developing countries. (UNFPA)

The fact that of the 80 million pregnancies in 2012, about 40 million ended in abortion demonstrates that there is a need to make more family planning services (UNFPA). With patience, determination and willingness to work with countries’ governments the UNFPA achieve results for millions around the world.