Aga Khan University and partners launch landmark study to help Kenya meet Maternal/Child Health Goals

Nairobi, Kenya, 28 April 2016 – Aga Khan University, Kenya’s Ministry of Health and a group of partners launched the Kenya Countdown to 2015 Country Case Study today, one of the most detailed analyses to date of Kenya’s progress in reducing maternal and child deaths.

The study provides policymakers, health care providers and the public with a roadmap that can guide efforts to accelerate improvements in maternal and child health and achieve the new targets in the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The launch was attended by the First Lady of the Republic of Kenya, Her Excellency Margaret Kenyatta, and Princess Zahra Aga Khan.

H.E Margaret Kenyatta congratulated the Aga Khan University and its partners, saying that “it is forums such as these that provide us stakeholders the opportunity to reflect on the challenges faced, refine our shared strategy, and renew our collective commitment to saving lives of mothers and children.”

"Kenya has a great opportunity today," said Princess Zahra Aga Khan. "A great opportunity to build a wonderful health system for Women and Children. To do so, as we heard, it will be essential to build an extensive system, which is an appropriate system, a hub-and-spoke system, a health system that focuses on the continuum of care from village-level provision of primary care to high quality sub-county and county hospitals and then on up to referral and teaching hospitals."

Kenya posted significant improvements in maternal and child health from 2003 to 2014, saving more than 53,000 lives and creating a foundation on which it can build over the next 15 years. But it did not meet Millennium Development Goals 4 and 5, which called for reducing the mortality rate for children under 5 by two-thirds and reducing the maternal mortality rate by three-quarters between 1990 and 2015. Kenyan child mortality over this period fell by 50 percent, and maternal mortality by 26 percent.

In a notable bright spot, Kenya is on track to meet the child mortality target in the Sustainable Development Goals, if the current rate of reduction holds. But meeting the targets for newborn and maternal deaths will require significant improvements. Newborn deaths would need to decline at double the recent rate, and maternal deaths at more than four times the recent rate, to achieve the goals. The Sustainable Development Goals were adopted by world leaders in September 2015 to replace the Millennium Development Goals and guide global efforts through 2030 to end poverty, improve health, fight inequality and injustice, and tackle climate change.
The study was a collaborative effort led by Aga Khan University and the SickKids Centre for Global Child Health of Toronto, with key contributions by experts from the Ministry of Health, the University of Nairobi and the FCI Program of Management Sciences for Health. Funding for the study and its dissemination was provided by the U.S. Fund for UNICEF and the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, through grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Government of Canada, respectively.

“This landmark study can be a catalyst that sparks action and guides collaborative efforts that prevent tragic and avoidable deaths of mothers and children,” said AKU Professor William Macharia, co-Principal Investigator of the study and Chair of the Department of Paediatrics and Associate Dean of Research, East Africa. “Now it’s up to all of us to work together, build on Kenya’s positive momentum, and make sure that every mother and every child has a chance to lead a healthy life.”

“The data and analysis this study contains both illuminate the past and shine a bright light that shows us the way forward,” said Dr. Zulfiqar Bhutta, co-Principal Investigator of the study, Founding Director of the AKU Centre of Excellence in Maternal and Child Health and co-Director of the SickKids Centre for Global Child Health in Toronto.

Key actions recommended by the Case Study include:

- Strengthening the health system in order to improve access to and delivery of services, especially those pertaining to care and management around labor and delivery.
- Scaling up community-level interventions to close the child-maternal/neonatal gap in health outcomes, improve equity and accelerate progress toward the 2030 targets.
- Increasing the focus on poor, least educated and rural women, with a particular emphasis on the North Eastern, Eastern, northern Rift Valley and Coastal regions.
- Addressing the unmet need for youth-friendly adolescent sexual and reproductive health services and programmes.
- Continuing to reduce out-of-pocket costs for reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health services, and increasing investments in maternal and neonatal health.
- Strengthening implementation of evidence-based interventions and development of innovative strategies, such as community-based outreach programmes, to reach those at the greatest risk and in the greatest need.
- Renewing commitment and ensuring accountability through transparent monitoring and evaluation schemes.

AKU’s leadership of the Case Study is part of its commitment to conducting research that contributes to the development of evidence-based health policies and practices that save and improve lives in Kenya and across East Africa. AKU has been one of the developing world’s leaders in maternal and child health research, and its Centre of Excellence in Women and Child Health is providing government and other stakeholders with essential analysis and advice to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals for maternal and child health.

Kenya was one of just 10 countries selected for a Country Case Study by Countdown to 2015, a global collaboration of more than 40 institutions and organisations, including AKU, devoted to analysing and promoting progress toward maternal and child health goals. Findings from the study will be published in leading medical journals.

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The *Aga Khan University* (AKU) is a not-for-profit institution of higher education that serves East Africans without regard to race, gender or religion. A university of and for the developing world, it is focused on preparing men and women to improve the quality of life in their societies. Over the last 15 years, it has graduated more than 2,500 nurses, specialist physicians and educators in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

More than 2,100 nurses have received a diploma or degree from AKU’s Schools of Nursing and Midwifery in East Africa, including nearly 940 in Kenya. AKU’s Postgraduate Medical Education (PGME) programme in Nairobi is training specialist physicians in nine fields, including family medicine, obstetrics and gynaecology, and paediatrics and child health, all of which are important to maternal and child health. Its PGME programme at the Aga Khan Hospital in Dar es Salaam has recently expanded and is now training specialists in family medicine, surgery and internal medicine. The Aga Khan University Hospital in Nairobi is a key provider of maternal and child health care: its paediatrics and OB/GYN departments recorded nearly 50,000 patient visits and admissions in 2015, and its doctors delivered more than 3,600 babies. In addition, the Hospital’s outreach clinics saw another 51,000 visits from children under age 5.

A total of 255 teachers and educational leaders from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania have earned a master’s degree at AKU’s Institute for Educational Development in Dar es Salaam, and several thousand more have taken a certificate or short course or workshop.

AKU is in the midst of a major expansion in East Africa that will see it grow into a comprehensive university offering a wide range of programmes. In Nairobi, it recently launched its Graduate School of Media and Communications, East African Institute and Institute for Human Development. In Arusha, AKU will offer an undergraduate liberal arts programme at its Faculty of Arts and Sciences, as well graduate professional education. Additional undergraduate medical and nursing programmes are also planned, along with the construction of a new Aga Khan University Hospital in Kampala.

The University is part of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), a private, international, non-denominational development organization that employs more than 80,000 people in more than 30 countries. AKDN’s agencies address complex development issues, including the provision of quality health care and education services, cultural and economic revitalization, micro-enterprise, entrepreneurship and economic development, the advancement of civil society, and the protection of the environment.