

Letter to the *Lancet*
A response to Lancet Maternal Survival Series paper 1¹
submitted 18 October 2006

Ronsmans and Graham¹ highlight the paucity of empirical data on maternal mortality, particularly at sub-national levels. This lack of data means politicians and planners do not know the extent of the differences in maternal mortality between, for instance, remote and urban communities, or between rich and poor. Lack of information makes needs-based resource allocation difficult, even where there is a will to act. Currently, there is also concern about our ability to monitor progress towards the fifth Millennium Development Goal of reducing maternal mortality by 75% by 2015.

An expert panel meeting on 29 September 2006, hosted at the Department of International Development and convened by the Initiative for Maternal Mortality Programme Assessment (IMMPACT) and the Health Metrics Network (HMN), looked at the feasibility of measuring maternal mortality through the census. Building on data already published² and on new information presented at the meeting, the panel endorsed the usefulness of the census as an extremely efficient and low-cost way of obtaining estimates of maternal mortality, including at sub-national levels and for socio-economic groups. Whilst recognizing that this would not be able to meet, in a timely manner, all information needs on maternal mortality, for those countries lacking fully accurate vital registration but able to mount a census this is a key opportunity.

Some guidelines have already been developed³. Plans have now been made to develop new and tailored advocacy tools, to conduct further research and development, to strengthen country capacity, and to provide technical assistance in the design, analysis and interpretation phases in time for the 2010 round of censuses. The first step is for countries to take the decision to organize a census, the second is to integrate the few additional questions on adult mortality, and the third is to analyze the data. We call for the international support and resources needed to make this a reality.

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on behalf of participants at the *Expert Panel on Capturing Maternal Mortality in the 2010 Census round*.

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1. Ronsmans C, Graham WJ, on behalf of The Lancet Maternal Survival Series steering group (2006) Maternal mortality: who, when, where, and why. *Lancet*. 368(9542):1189-200.

2. Stanton C, Hobcraft J, Hill K, Kodjogbe N, Mapeta WT, Munene F, Naghavi M, Rabeza V, Sisouphanthong B, Campbell O. Every death counts: measurement of maternal mortality via a census. *Bull World Health Organ*. 2001;79(7):657-64. http://www.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0042-96862001000700011&lng=en&nrm=iso. [last accessed 2006-09-29]

³ Hill K, Stanton C, Gupta N. 2001. Measuring Maternal Mortality from a Census: Guidelines for Potential Users. MEASURE Evaluation Manual Series, No. 4. MEASURE Evaluation; Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA. Also <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/measure/publications/pdf/ms-01-04.pdf#search=%22stanton%20hill%20census%20maternal%20mortality%22> accessed 29 Sept 2006

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