



MDG 4 5 CAPE TOWN COUNTDOWN CONFERENCE: 17 – 19 APRIL 2008
ADDRESS BY SARAH BROWN, PATRON, WHITE RIBBON ALLIANCE

Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

It is a privilege to address such a distinguished audience at such an important conference. We are united in one common effort - to improve mother and child health.

I regret I cannot be with you but I would like to congratulate the organizing team and the Countdown to 2015 Group for this timely event.

I have the honour to be patron of the White Ribbon Alliance. We are glad to join you in Cape Town to play our part making pregnancy, child birth and childhood safer. I am grateful to [*Catherine Taylor*] of the White Ribbon Alliance for delivering this statement on my behalf.

I do not need to repeat the stubbornly flat lining statistics on Mother and Child Health. Nor do I need to list the benefits of a better performance for family life and society. Technically, most of these deaths are unnecessary, avoidable and preventable.

I welcome politicians attending from the Inter Parliamentary Union. It is politicians who set the budget priorities shaping the affairs of each nation. And it is politicians who told us that the key bottleneck to real progress on mother and child health is lack of political will

Prime Minister Stoltenberg identified the importance of political will - hence the role of advocacy and communication - in the 2007 Global Campaign on the Health MDGs - a theme strongly reinforced by the British Parliament's International Development Committee enquiry into maternal health, published in February.

And now, in the special Countdown issue of The Lancet, Richard Horton has captured the mood when he writes:

'Children and mothers are dying because those who have the power to prevent their deaths choose not to act.'

Unlocking political will is about changing attitudes and opinions. Public opinion needs to become more demanding on Mother and Child Health. Governments need to become more responsive and accountable. It is in their political interests to do so.

The smart politician knows that involving the people in policy making and being responsive to their needs is the driver of improvements in the capacity, competence and performance of health systems, whether public or private. And the smart politician does this because she knows an essential truth - improving performance on health is a vote winner.

Thanks to advocacy and communication, there is an urgent sense of global solidarity here today. Now, we must all work to help reformers take this energy to each of the 68 high burden countries

That is what we do in the White Ribbon Alliance. And advocacy is a vital element of the work of the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health. Both are uniting experts and advocates at all levels to push for needed actions. Members of the White ribbon Alliance, in their communities, are the only people who can make sure that governments make true on their promises.

This conference is the opportunity to put advocacy at the centre of our efforts.

First: let us ask each high burden country to request funding and support for in-country advocacy and communication work and projects to empower women and communities. These are the people who know the problems and know how to fix them. Let's listen to them and support them.

Second: let us ask the donors to fund such requests.

The sums are modest - perhaps US \$ 2 million for a country-driven two year advocacy communication project in each high burden country which ends the silence and makes the voices of women and their communities heard. Asking donors to put aside US \$ 150 million for advocacy over the next two years is a small price to pay to get the Mother and Child Health indicators back on track.

Third: let us also ask this Conference formally to mandate the Partnership for Maternal Newborn and Child Health and the White Ribbon Alliance to work together as the coordinators and enablers of in-country advocacy - vital work for improving mother and child health and so get MDGs 4 and 5 back on track.

Seven million mothers, babies and children will die of avoidable causes by this time next year. We have failed them. Let us put an end to failure. Let us ensure that the international development community, backed by the G8 and United Nations, fund in-country advocacy for better mother and child health - perhaps the greatest gift our generation can pass to the next.

Let this conference signal to the forward-thinking leaders in each of the 68 high burden countries that they have not only our moral, but financial support. Let us focus our work on building political will by winning hearts and changing minds. Let us leave Cape Town resolved to put advocacy at the heart of our efforts to kick start action for better mother and child health and build on the work of those communities and countries that have been successful.

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