



**Speech of Dr Francisco Songane
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Representing Partners of the *Countdown to 2015* Initiative**

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Distinguished President of the Assembly and President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Mister the Secretary General of the IPU, Members of Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me express our genuine gratitude on behalf of over 20 organizations and partners of the *Countdown to 2015* initiative on maternal, newborn and child survival for this opportunity to address your prestigious Assembly of world Parliamentarians.

Global health partners are extremely encouraged and inspired by our first collaboration with the 118th IPU Assembly. Over 500 delegates of health policy-makers, including Members of Parliament from both developing and developed countries discussed findings of the "Tracking progress in maternal, newborn and child survival" report at a panel of the IPU Assembly and a special session of the Countdown Conference in Cape Town in April 2008.

I am sure you will agree with me that it is unacceptable that millions of women, mothers and children are being denied their right to basic health in many countries today. The situation is causing nearly 10 million innocent deaths each year: every minute a mother dies from pregnancy and child birth-related causes, and every 3 seconds a child perishes due to shortage of the most basic health care.

This reality persists and poses an even deeper threat to the health and well-being of our most vulnerable families and communities today when combined with triple effects of current global crisis affecting food, fuel and finances.

According to the 2008 Countdown report which we jointly launched, out of the 68 countries where 97% of global maternal and child deaths occur, only 16 countries were "on track" to achieve the child survival MDG 4. Also only 56 out of these 68 countries had "high or very high" maternal mortality ratios, far off track to achieve the MDG 5 for maternal survival by 2015.

Nearly all causes of mortality are known, preventable or treatable. Solutions exist and millions of lives can be saved, when and where the solutions are applied. And if political will and investments are in place, these challenges can be overcome as shown by experiences of high burden countries. Thanks to increased investments and scale up of immunizations, child mortality from measles was reduced by 91% in Africa—clear success.

However, vital investment is still missing in other areas of care. Interventions such as treatments of pneumonia, malaria and diarrhoea reach less than half of all children in sub-Saharan Africa. Nearly half of all mothers in Africa and South Asia do not have access to skilled care attendance at birth. 99% of maternal deaths occur in developing countries, presenting the biggest discrepancy in today's world. This calls for urgent investment in health systems, so that all women and children can have access to the full range of services they need, not just some of them.

Distinguished Members of Parliaments from across the world,

You can make a difference. Across 68 countries that are the focus of the Countdown effort, maternal, newborn and child health issues need to attract more political attention, support in improved legislation, and increased investment.

As Members of Parliament, you represent the voices of the voiceless—women and children living in impoverished communities. You play a vital role in approving national budgets or determining international aid for maternal and child health programmes. You can legislate to ensure women and children's rights to essential health care are implemented. You can oversee implementation of government policies and advocate nationally and internationally to support the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals 4 and 5. You can make change happen, a privilege that millions of mothers and children entrusted upon you.

Only with increased political commitment and investment can the goals for maternal, newborn and child health be achieved. However, global investment is still insufficient. Around US\$3.5 billion was invested into maternal, newborn and child health in 2006 the most recent year for which we have sound data. Overall, approximately US\$10 billion are needed in additional investment each year to turn the tide.

We are encouraged by more and more political leaders becoming committed to the cause. A powerful network of Global Leaders for MDGs 4 and 5, initiated by Heads of State and Governments in 2007 is a beacon of hope to enable broader international efforts to address maternal, newborn and child health issues. Many Members of Parliament are initiating efforts in their constituencies as well.

Excellencies,

These issues are not getting the full attention they deserve. Urgent action is needed to change the course of this tragedy. And you have the POWER TO ACT and to lead the change.

As you know, we issued a joint commitment in April 2008. We agreed that in all countries, and particularly in 68 countries of the Countdown effort, health partners and Parliamentarians will join forces to lead the change. We agreed that we will work together to respect the rights of these millions of women and children, not only to health, but also to well-being.

Accountability is key to achieve this goal and we hope that at the next assembly in 2009, many Parliaments and Parliamentarians will be able to share their experiences, lessons and success stories of how you led the change in your constituencies, countries and regions. Each piece of legislation or support you initiate; each budget item you ensure; and each new investment you put forward to support women and children will empower families, communities and societies.

We look forward to working with you in developing and sharing these case studies and hope to see you in Addis Ababa in April 2009.

Thank you very much for your attention.