

Bringing vital family planning services to rural women in Zambia

- By Delegation of the EU to the Republic of Zambia and Marie Stopes Zambia, European Union

During her first pregnancy, Judith Muntahli was bitten by a snake. By the time she got to the hospital, infection had set in and her leg had to be amputated. With no access to contraception, Judith carried nine more pregnancies on one leg using crutches. Sadly, her 10th child died when he was just a month old.

After hearing that Marie Stopes Zambia (MSZ) was going to visit her village to run a family planning clinic, Judith decided she'd like to hear more about how she could avoid becoming pregnant again. Together with her husband, Judith met the MSZ outreach team to find out more about the different methods of family planning. Convinced her body couldn't handle yet another pregnancy, Judith decided to undergo female surgical contraception, which was carried out by one of MSZ's mobile clinical outreach teams.

Afterwards, Judith said: "Since I had the procedure, I don't worry about falling pregnant ever again and my sex life has improved".

Judith is one of the 26 000 women in Muchinga Province who will be using modern contraceptive methods by 2016, as a result of MSZ's innovative family planning project, financed by the European Union in Zambia.

Zambia has one of the youngest, most rural populations in the world, with 46% of its population under the age of 15 (2010 census). Rates of use of modern methods of contraception have improved greatly over the past two decades. However, lack of access to family planning services is a major contributor to the 16% of births which are reported as unwanted and the estimated 30% of maternal deaths caused by unsafe abortions. Close to one in every two girls in Zambia have given birth by the age of 19, and this age group also accounts for an estimated 80% of unsafe abortions carried out. So the need for accessible contraceptive services in Zambia – particularly for unmarried adolescent girls – is profound.

MSZ's EU-funded 'Maternal and sexual-reproductive health rights' project works in five districts in Muchinga Province and works closely with government District Medical Officers to plan and deliver outreach services across 45 rural health facilities.

These five districts are among the most under-served in Zambia both in terms of contraceptive services and healthcare. One of the biggest challenges to delivering these services in Zambia is dealing with the huge distances between communities and facilities. Mpika District alone is the size of Denmark.

To address this challenge, Marie Stopes uses the 'camping model'. From its bases in Muchinga Province, a customised MSZ Land Rover - stuffed with equipment and manned with specialised medical staff - travels up to 200 km into some of the most rural parts of the province. At these mobile clinics, the team provides group and individual counselling, HIV testing, contraception and offers advice on follow-up. Overall, demand hugely exceeds what the project and government health facilities can supply. There is an appointment system in place, yet on some occasions more women turn up for services than can be seen that day, with many of them having walked up to 25 km. When that happens, the team adjusts its schedule and stays for an extra night, so that the remaining clients can be seen the following day. Marie Stopes Zambia Country Director Adrienne Quintana said: "The high uptake of our services is a reflection of the huge unmet need for family planning in this area. With support from traditional leaders, many husbands as well as wives now understand how family planning contributes to the development of their communities, positively impacting on health, education and livelihoods." Judith, speaking about the impact on her and her family, said; "the procedure has given me and my husband a chance to focus on taking care of our nine children and giving them a better life".

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