



# A Comprehensive Approach to Maternal and Child Health Care in West Africa

## Findings from the Learning Tour to Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire

May 28-June 4, 2016

From May 28-June 4, a group of House and Senate congressional staffers, technical experts and a media representative, traveled with CARE to visit Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire, where they learned about the importance of U.S. investments in maternal and child health to promote better health outcomes for women and youth in West Africa. Throughout the trip, the delegation witnessed firsthand the importance of access to comprehensive health services at each milestone of a woman's life – from adolescence, to motherhood, to the first critical days of her child's life. This continuum of care helps to ensure women, their families and communities are able to survive and thrive.

### ► Day 1: Setting the Scene: Why Sierra Leone?

The delegation began the Learning Tour in Sierra Leone with a briefing by local technical experts, including Evariste Sindyagaya, CARE Sierra Leone country director; Dr. Stacey Means, HealthCo coordinator at the International Rescue Committee (IRC); and Dr. Alison Jenkins, chief of child survival and development at the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). The panelists described the current programs being implemented in Sierra Leone that integrate proven health interventions and showcase the successes seen to date from this approach. The delegation learned how, presently, Sierra Leone is grappling with high poverty rates and very weak health indicators, and how many women and youth encounter difficulty – either due to cost, location or social stigma – in accessing life-saving health services. The group also discussed ways the U.S. can support Sierra Leone in strengthening the health system, including the need for flexible U.S. development funding in order to adequately respond to maternal and child health needs, particularly after the Ebola response efforts have concluded.



The delegates hear from local technical experts on the current health programs being implemented in Sierra Leone and ways the U.S. can support Sierra Leone in strengthening the health system.

### Participants:

**Heather Anderson**  
Senior Vice President of Programming  
Global Health Corps

**Jeffrey Levicki**  
Deputy Press Secretary  
Rep. Lynn Jenkins (R-KS-2)

**Evan McMullin**  
Chief Policy Director, House Republican Conference  
Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA-5)

**Nandita Thatte**  
Senior Technical Advisor  
Office of Population and Reproductive Health  
U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

**Leslie Goldman**  
Freelance Journalist

**Michael Lowry**  
Legislative Director  
Rep. Ann Wagner (R-MO-2)

**Dana Richter**  
Legislative Assistant  
Sen. Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV)

### YACAN Girls' Empowerment Program

After the briefing, the delegation traveled to Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone, to visit the Youth and Child Advocacy Network (YACAN) center. The delegation was greeted by Hassan Kanu, the director and original co-founder of the YACAN program. Hassan provided background on how YACAN targets youth and children to cultivate champions to advocate on issues affecting youth in Sierra Leone, particularly girls who are most vulnerable. Hassan also discussed how the YACAN program creates a weekly broadcast, the first of its kind produced for and by youth in the local language of Krio, to serve as a forum to promote sensitization and raise awareness of issues important to girls and youth in Sierra Leone. Next, the delegation had a chance to witness and participate in a brief simulation of this weekly youth broadcast, during which they heard from girl students in the program who highlighted topics such as the importance of access to education, reproductive health and sanitation for school aged girls and preventing sexual assault and corporal punishment in school.



*A group of girls from the YACAN program perform a mock radio broadcast for the delegation and discuss issues related to teen pregnancy and reproductive health, and abuse and violence at school or at home, and provide suggestions for how to address these issues.*

### Briefing with U.S. Mission in Sierra Leone

Later that day, the delegation participated in a lunch briefing with the U.S. Mission in Sierra Leone. The U.S. Ambassador to Sierra Leone, John Hoover, provided context on the current U.S. government strategy in Sierra Leone. During the luncheon, Dr. Jatinder Cheema, acting country coordinator for USAID in Sierra Leone, highlighted the U.S. government's development strategy in-country with a focus on women's issues, particularly on maternal and child health and family planning. Dr. Cheema also discussed the U.S. government's role in combating the Ebola virus and building local capacity to respond to the outbreak.

### Meeting with First Lady of Sierra Leone

Immediately following the lunch briefing, the delegation transferred to the office of the First Lady of Sierra Leone, Sia Nyama Koroma. The first lady, who has been working to prioritize maternal and child health in Sierra Leone, discussed her work to promote better health outcomes for women through the Women Initiative for Safer Health (WISH), a program that aims to reduce child and maternal mortality by improving access to health facilities and training health workers throughout the country.



*The delegation meets with the first lady of Sierra Leone, a champion on issues related to women's empowerment and health promotion in the country.*

### Reception with U.S. Ambassador to Sierra Leone

To close out the day, the delegation attended a reception at Ambassador Hoover's residence, where approximately 40 local partners and NGOs were in attendance. In his opening remarks, Ambassador Hoover discussed the grave health needs in Sierra Leone and the importance of U.S. support and investments in enhancing the capacity of the country's health sector to respond to the needs of women and girls in the country.

**"It is important to design programs that specifically target women, as development programs that are designed to benefit everyone may not reach those who are most vulnerable, particularly women."**

**Evariste Sindayigaya, Country Director, CARE Sierra Leone**

## ► Day 2: Empowering Women and Girls in Post-Ebola West Africa

### Briefing with Influential Sierra Leonean Women

The next day, the delegation sat down with three influential Sierra Leonean women to explore the role that women play in shaping gender policy in the country. The group heard from Anita Koroma, representative of the Girl

Child Network in Sierra Leone; Mary Okumu, representative of UN Women; and Bernadette French, director of the human rights, justice and security program at the Campaign for Good Governance. The panelists discussed the challenges in advocating for women's health and rights in Sierra Leone and the different approaches that have been implemented to increase public awareness on the important role of girls' and women's empowerment.

### Visit with Ebola Survivors and Widows

Later that afternoon, the delegation traveled about 30 minutes outside of Freetown to hear from beneficiaries of CARE's Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) program who have been severely impacted by Ebola. The delegation heard from Mabinty, a young mother and wife who told the group how she and her husband Mohamad contracted the Ebola virus and their story of survival. Mabinty spoke of the stigma she faced in accessing health services due to fear felt by health workers of contracting the virus. Furthermore, many communities and local health facilities were ill-equipped to adequately respond to the disease epidemic, given the weak health infrastructure that existed in Sierra Leone prior to the outbreak. While Mabinty and her husband survived, they lost several relatives during the outbreak, including her husband's father and their three-year-old daughter.

During the visit, the women discussed how VSLA savings were a lifeline to get them through the financial hardship they faced as a result of the outbreak. Many of the women discussed how they relied on the money to keep their businesses afloat when all commerce halted as communities were quarantined. These funds also helped to provide food for their families after their crops were destroyed during these quarantines. Currently, these women are using the money saved through their VSLA groups to rebuild their businesses and support their families following the end of the outbreak.



*The delegation meets with Mabinty, a young wife and mother, who tells her story of surviving the Ebola outbreak and how her VSLA savings have helped her to support her family.*

### Community Health Workers and Peri-Urban Community Health Facility

Next, the group visited a small community health facility supported by Concern Worldwide located in Allentown, Sierra Leone. There, they were greeted by Yusuf Koroma, the health center director, who delivered a briefing on the types of services provided at the clinic and the role of the community health workers in linking patients to health services. The delegation then toured the health center, where they saw the antenatal care room, delivery room, observation and post-delivery station and main reception area where patients receive counseling on birth spacing and the contraceptive methods available.

Following the tour, the delegation met with beneficiaries from the community health worker program. The delegation met with two women who had recently given birth and were relying on community health workers to keep themselves and their newborn children healthy. One group met Tenneh Koroma, a 25-year-old mother of two, and her 4-month-old son named David Blessing. During the health visit, Tenneh heard from a community health worker about how important exclusive breastfeeding is in keeping infants healthy during their first six months of life.



*The delegates sit down with Tenneh Koroma and her four-month-old son and witness a simulation of what a typical community health worker visit consists of. During the simulation, Tenneh learned about the importance of exclusive breastfeeding and nutrition for newborn children and infants.*

Later that evening, the delegation boarded a plane to travel from Freetown to Abidjan, the economic capital of Côte d'Ivoire, which is home to nearly 4.7 million people. There, the delegation learned about the progress that has been seen in the health sector to-date. In comparison to Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire has a more stable economy with slightly more resources. However, many challenges still persist in tackling maternal and child mortality in the country.

## ► Day 3: Setting the Scene: Why Côte d'Ivoire?

### Meeting with Minister of Health and Public Hygiene in Côte d'Ivoire

To start the day, the delegation, along with the U.S. ambassador to Côte d'Ivoire, met with the Minister of Health and Public Hygiene, Raymonde Goudou Coffie. The minister spoke to the group about the government's efforts to invest in a stronger health workforce and build more comprehensive health infrastructure in the country. She also provided an overview of the health challenges, successes and health system structure in Côte d'Ivoire, particularly in regards to maternal and child health.



*The delegation, along with U.S. Ambassador Terence P. McCulley, meets with Dr. Raymonde Goudou Coffie, Minister of Health and Public Hygiene in Côte d'Ivoire, who discusses the Ivorian government's efforts to prioritize maternal and child health and build the health infrastructure in the country.*

### Scene-Setter Briefing

Later that morning, the group sat down with a panel of local technical experts, including Guillaume Aguetant, country director for CARE Côte d'Ivoire; Eliane Dogoré, country director for EngenderHealth; and Rachel Wax, country representative of Population Services International (PSI) in Côte d'Ivoire. The panelists spoke to the delegation about the work currently being done by civil society groups and non-governmental organizations to improve access to maternal and reproductive health services, particularly family planning. The group also learned about some of the statistics on the current unmet need for contraceptives in Côte d'Ivoire, where nearly 1 in 3 women lack access to modern contraceptive methods.

### Lunch Briefing with U.S. Mission

In the afternoon, the delegation had an opportunity to sit down over lunch with Nancy Nolan, acting director of USAID Côte d'Ivoire health office; Michelle Assoumou Konin, health promotion advisor for USAID Côte d'Ivoire; and Sereen Thaddeus, community health team lead for USAID Côte d'Ivoire. During the lunch briefing, the delegation learned

about the work of the U.S. government to promote stronger livelihoods and economic empowerment for women in Côte d'Ivoire, as well as facilitate health system strengthening and capacity-building of health workers and skilled health professionals at all levels of care.

### CARE VSLA Program

Following the lunch, the delegation met with a group of women from CARE's Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) program, which helps women establish community savings groups to increase economic opportunity and promote female entrepreneurship. These women meet bi-weekly to discuss topics important to women in their community, including health promotion. During the visit, the group also heard from Fati Abdou, project manager for VSLAs in Côte d'Ivoire, and Nurse Coulibaly Koussoum who spoke to the women about the link between health and economic empowerment. Fati spoke to the VSLA leaders about different contraceptive methods women can use to safely time and space their pregnancies, information these leaders can then disseminate to women in their respective VSLA groups.

**“The snowball effects of investing in women are huge. For every dollar spent towards maternal and child health, an impact can be seen for generations.”**

—Nandita Thatte, Sr. Technical Advisor, USAID

### Reception with U.S. Ambassador to Côte d'Ivoire

The delegation closed the day with a reception co-hosted by CARE and the U.S. Ambassador to Côte d'Ivoire Terrance P. McCulley. During the reception, Ambassador McCulley gave remarks before an audience of more than 50 guests, including more than 40 local and international NGO partners. The Minister of Women, Family and Protection of Children was also there in attendance. In his speech, the ambassador highlighted the resilience and strength of the Ivorian people and how important support from the U.S. government is in helping Côte d'Ivoire achieve its goal of becoming an emerging economy by 2020.

## ► Day 4: Increasing Access to Health and GBV Services

The next morning, the delegation traveled to San Pedro, a city located along the Western coastal region of Côte d'Ivoire. There, the delegation had an opportunity to compare the health service provision available in Sierra Leone to that in more rural areas of Côte d'Ivoire. The group also learned about some of the challenges women face in accessing legal services and what is being done to provide justice to victims of gender-based violence.

### Meet with Community Health Workers

After arriving in San Pedro, the delegation went directly to the Association for the Promotion of Women's Health, Maternal, Child and Family (APROSAM) community health center, which receives community health worker training and technical assistance from CARE. Upon arrival at the center, the delegation was received by Koffi Brou, executive director of the center. Koffi gave an overview of the health system in Côte d'Ivoire and discussed how the local government is working to help implement the community health worker capacity-building program in partnership with CARE. Koffi also provided context on the current health situation in San Pedro, discussing the unmet family planning needs within the city and across the country. Next, the delegation received a tour of the health facility from Marie Kouasizou, a midwife at the center, who showed the delegation the vaccine and HIV testing area, pre-natal services room, delivery room and the pharmacy.



*The group tours the APROSAM community health center, which provides pre- and post-natal care, delivery services, vaccinations and health screenings for women and children.*

Next, the delegation was divided into two groups to visit women and see a simulation of a typical community health worker visit in San Pedro. One group met Komandé Prisca, a 39-year-old, soon-to-be mother of four children who was 9 months pregnant at the time of the visit. During the site visit, Komandé heard from a community health worker about water and sanitation practices and the importance of keeping her living space clean, as well as why bed-nets are an important tool to prevent malaria, especially for expectant mothers and mothers with young children.

### PALAJ Women's Justice Center

Later that afternoon, the delegation visited a local justice clinic that provides legal support and counseling to women and men in Côte d'Ivoire. The delegation was greeted by Sanata Konate Kone, the center coordinator

for the Project on Improvement of Access to Rights and Justice in Ivory Coast (PALAJ). She provided a brief overview of the history of the facility and types of legal services that are provided to women, youth and survivors of gender-based violence. Next, the delegation heard from Dr. Talibo Al'mozener, a representative of UNFPA, who described the role UNFPA plays in supporting the center and discussed the partnership UN agencies have with the Government of Côte d'Ivoire in addressing gender-based violence.

The delegation then sat down to see a drama performance by local community members and clients of the center who performed a skit on the implications of early and forced marriage, particularly as it relates to girls' access to education and the risks associated with teenage pregnancy. The delegation had a chance to ask the cast members questions to learn more about creative ways the community is using theater and other sensitization techniques to raise awareness of women's and girls' legal rights, as well as prevent gender-based violence and early marriage in their communities.



*In a drama performance by local community members at the PALAJ Women's Justice Center, the delegation learns of the challenges of combatting early and forced marriage in Côte d'Ivoire and witnesses ways access to information and legal services can help to keep girls in school.*

Finally, the delegation heard from Madame Guede Sali, an entrepreneur and paralegal who works to bring women in the community together to learn about their rights and legal services. The group also heard from Beatrice Guiblo, who told her story of how she overcame an abusive marriage and received legal counseling on her rights to claim a stake in the business she and her former husband had co-founded after she filed for divorce. Tahé Xavier, a male client of the center, talked about what he has learned from his involvement in the center on the importance of recognizing and promoting youth and women's rights in the community.

### Taking Action Back Home

To end the day, the delegation came together over dinner to reflect on the programs visited and consider the trip's goals and learning objectives. The dinner, which was facilitated by Kristin Wells, senior director of government relations at CARE, encouraged the group to reflect on their most memorable experiences from the trip, as well as discuss ideas for next steps upon return home from the Learning Tour. They discussed how each of the delegates can ensure development programs continue to provide life-saving care and support to women and families in Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire and around the world.

### ► Day 5: The Next Level of Care and Engaging Men around Women's Health

On the last day of the trip, the delegation traveled to Yamoussoukro, the official political capital of Côte d'Ivoire, to learn about maternal health programming currently being implemented in this part of the country.

#### Toumodi District Hospital

The delegation began the day with a visit to a district hospital located in the Toumodi district of Yamoussoukro. This hospital serves as the next level of care above the health centers located in Côte d'Ivoire. The hospital provides comprehensive reproductive health services and also receives high-risk referral cases from area health centers, which most frequently include mothers experiencing severe birth complications or post-natal difficulties. At the hospital, the delegation was greeted by Dr. Ane of UNFPA; Dr. Edouard Koffi, regional medical doctor of the hospital; and Dr. Konan, the Toumodi departmental health director who provided an overview of the hospital and services offered to patients.

Dr. Konan then led the group on a tour of the hospital, which included the gynecological consultation room, midwife station, delivery room, post-natal area, HIV consultation room, family planning consultation room and the nutrition and vaccination area that provides education on exclusive breastfeeding and nutrition counseling for newborn and infant children.

#### UNFPA Husband School

Before returning to Abidjan, the delegation next visited a program funded by UNFPA often referred to as a "Husband School" that provides training to husbands, men and youth on the importance of family planning and cultivates community advocates to better promote women's health. During the visit, the delegation

sat down with community members to witness a demonstration of a "model husband" training by men leaders in the community. During the simulation, the group heard from Donald Kouame, a "model husband", also known as a community coach, who spoke to a young couple on the importance of maternal health and how they encourage women to visit health clinics and learn about family planning methods to ensure the healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies. The group also had a chance to hear from young men in the village about how the program has shaped their views on sexual and reproductive health.



*The delegation hears from a group of male participants in the UNFPA-funded "Husband School", which educates men on the importance of supporting their wives and partners in accessing maternal and reproductive health services.*

### Conclusion:

As the delegation saw, throughout every stage of her life, a woman will depend on a variety of quality services to lead a healthy lifestyle – services that include nutrition counseling, family planning, pre- and post-natal care and access to a variety of vaccinations and essential medicines. No one aspect of care is separate or more important than the next. From adolescence, to adulthood, to motherhood, to the first 1,000 days of her child's life, a woman depends on a comprehensive and responsive continuum of care that can meet her needs, her partner's and her family's needs at every step of the way. For this reason, solutions that aim to create such comprehensive health systems will be key in breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting better health outcomes for women and their families.

As seen throughout this trip, the governments of Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire must prioritize maternal, newborn and child health. At the same time, the international community should maintain investments and offer long-term, flexible financial support for global health programs aimed at ending preventable maternal

and child death. Finally, the private sector must play a larger role by investing in the innovative solutions that are improving health outcomes, strengthening workforces and economies. Working together, these stakeholders can build a smart, strategic, long-term approach to health policies that emphasize the integration of proven solutions in Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire. Leveraging the influence and special capabilities of the United States will motivate others to do more and create lasting collaborations that could transform the lives of millions in these two countries and around the world.

## Policy Recommendations

### Support Smart Foreign Assistance

U.S. foreign assistance is critical to building a stable and secure world. U.S.-funded programs produce real change in the lives of children and families living in extreme poverty, while at the same time strengthening U.S. economic security, defending against global health threats and creating the basis for respect and goodwill toward the U.S. in countries around the world. By emphasizing self-reliance and sustainability, U.S. foreign assistance helps people help themselves.

One of the most important things the U.S. can do to fight global poverty is devote sufficient resources to these programs. The International Affairs budget is just one percent of the total federal budget, yet it helps to feed millions, reduce mortality for women and children and enables the U.S. to respond to humanitarian

crises like the conflict in Syria or the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. While we recognize the significance of this difficult budget climate, CARE advocates for the U.S. to maintain and strengthen its support for the International Affairs budget, including funding for maternal and child health and gender equality.

### Invest in Women and Girls

CARE advocates for the U.S. government to integrate gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment throughout its foreign assistance programs. This can be done by creating strong policies and robust resources to promote girls' education and leadership, prevent child marriage and combat gender-based violence.

CARE supports the Reach Every Mother and Child Act of 2015, a bill which would leverage existing resources to ensure that proven interventions in maternal and child health are integrated and scaled up across the world. This bipartisan legislation would advance the U.S. government priority of ending preventable maternal and child deaths by 2035. This is a meaningful and achievable goal that requires broad support to uphold.

CARE supports strong U.S. commitment for lifesaving maternal and child health programming in the international affairs budget. Key among these interventions is the practice of **healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies**, which is funded through the family planning line item of the International Affairs budget.

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We are deeply grateful to the many people who generously gave of their time to make this visit to Sierra Leone and the Côte d'Ivoire a success. CARE specifically thanks the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for its generous financial support of the Learning Tours.

If you are interested in learning more about CARE's Learning Tours program, please contact:

**CARE Learning Tours**  
1899 L Street NW, Suite 500  
Washington, D.C. 20036



**202-595-2800**  
**CARELearningTours@care.org**  
**www.care.org/learningtours**

