Warrap calls for public health education to combat preventable diseases

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August 19, 2012 (JUBA) - Health experts and government authorities in South Sudan's Warrap State have called for increased efforts and new innovative approaches to combat high maternal and infant mortality rates through the promotion of preventative care.

According to a report by the United Nation Children's fund (UNICEF), an estimated 6 million people in South Sudan lacks pit latrines and defecate in the open spaces. Open defecation is a major contributing factor to myriad of water and sanitation related diseases such as diarrhea, typhoid, polio, cholera, acute respiratory infection amongst others.

"In South Sudan, according to the latest weekly bulletin from the Ministry of Health, there were 4,713 reported cases of diarrhea, of which 58% were children- in the second week of July this year. 14 deaths were related to these incidents. Repeated episodes of diarrhea attacks makes children more vulnerable to other diseases and malnutrition. These needless deaths and suffering can be prevented if we improve on our hygiene and sanitation practices", the report says.

Michael Milly Hussein, the country's minister of health says many delivering mothers died during births due to complications often associated to preventable diseases mostly in rural areas where basic health care services are seriously virtually lacking.

South Sudan has some of the worst statistics for maternal mortality in the world.

"Today many people in South Sudan die of simple and preventable diseases like diarrhea because of lack of awareness. There are no trained and skilled health workers. Today our community health workers with limited knowledge and skills run facilities that are supposed to be run by trained practitioners", Hussein said.

"These figures are high and there should be concerted efforts by medical workers and other stakeholders to bring this down," he said stressing the need to scale up best practices in midwifery education and practices to strengthen health systems in order to improve maternal health outcomes in the country.

Minister Hussein was reacting to a report by the UNICEF highlighting challenges associated to lack of hygiene and sanitary practices in most parts of the country. UNICEF made the report after conducting an assessment in Warrap State on 11 August 2012.

The assessment team comprised staff members from State Ministry of Cooperative and Rural Development. It was carried out in Adiem in Gogrial West County, Warrap State. The village located about 20 minutes drive from Gogrial Center, is situated at the bank of Jur River, and has 68 households.

"This is a very important achievement as it marks the first ever successful imitative in the country. The development offers hope to the country as it struggles to deal with the devastating effects of poor sanitation", the report adds in part.

Joseph Malek, Warrap State Minister of Cooperative and Rural Development explained in a separate interview that the exercise was meant to mobilize communities to work towards stopping open defecation.

He said the achievement of the Adiem community provides an opportunity for the rest of the country to "reflect on the sanitation situation and ask ourselves what contribution we can make to increase the number of Open Defecation Faeces villages in the country."

It outlines featured good governance, financing, medicines and technology, human resources, information and service delivery. It also includes development of a road map and capacity building plans involving sanitation actors in the country, Develop a functional inter agency to coordinate at the National level and State levels. Initiate community based initiative to ensure regular follow ups to support and encourage the villages to progressively work towards becoming Open Defecation Faeces Free State.

The other objective of the forum was to share evidence-based practices which will be forwarded for the ministerial meeting scheduled later this year. The meeting is intended to help governments provide quality, efficient and effective health care services to a population of over 8 million people in the country.

Minister Malek asked member community leaders and stakeholders to involve religious leaders, faith-based organizations and the media to educate the public.

Malek believes that once the public is educated, there will be change of attitude and appealed for international assistance to support to finance the health care systems to reduce maternal and child deaths.

The initiative is one of the interventions being championed by the Government of South Sudan, UNICEF and WASH partners to address poor sanitation known as Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS).