

## Family Planning: Improving Lives in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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**Eastern DRC**—Young Mukwe\* is just 14 months old, and already he is malnourished and underweight. When he was a few months old, his mother became pregnant again. As a result of his mother's pregnancy and the subsequent birth of his twin siblings, Mukwe's nutritional status deteriorated and his future health and well-being are threatened.

Tragically, close and frequent pregnancies are common in many countries where family planning is not widely used. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), contra-

ceptive use fell sharply during the long period of armed conflict, which still continues in many areas. Only 4% of married women of reproductive age now use a modern family planning method. In addition, the standard of living has greatly deteriorated, and approximately 70% of the country's people lack access to health care. At the moment, women's lives are characterized by hard work and many close pregnancies that begin early and end late.

Contraception can be life-saving for families that are already overburdened. Appropriate spacing of pregnancies reduces risks to the child and has positive health benefits for mothers. Yet many contraceptive methods remain underutilized in the DRC and other countries. This picture of Mukwe, being held by a nurse, was taken when his mother came to the Regional Hospital in Lubero to receive an IUD—a safe and effective modern contraceptive method not widely used in Africa.

During a recent contraceptive technology update (CTU) held by the ACQUIRE Project<sup>1</sup> in the DRC, providers were trained in offering family planning services, such as the IUD.

<sup>1</sup> The ACQUIRE Project (Access, Quality, and Use in Reproductive Health) is a collaborative project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and managed by EngenderHealth, in partnership with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency International (ADRA), CARE, IntraHealth International, Inc., Meridian Group International, Inc., and the Society for Women and AIDS in Africa (SWAA). The ACQUIRE Project's mandate is to advance and support reproductive health and family planning services, with a focus on facility-based and clinical care.

\*Name changed for anonymity.

The CTU gave 14 participating service providers from three health zones an opportunity to learn about the latest in contraceptive technology and to practice their skills. During three practical sessions, several hundred women received correct information on family planning and its benefits. The providers in turn recognized that their clients are indeed interested in contraception, despite the religious and socio-cultural barriers they may have initially thought insurmountable.

Providers enhanced their knowledge and skills, and they are now in a better position to offer a range of family planning services. Women such as Mukwe's young mother will now be able to appropriately space their children and limit the number of children they choose to have, thus contributing to both their family's and their own health and well-being.

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The Medecin Chef de la Zone and two other participants conducting family planning education for clients at Kasalala Health Center

The March 2006 CTU was conducted and organized by the ACQUIRE Project and the Jane Goodall Institute (JGI). With funding from USAID, ACQUIRE is providing technical assistance to JGI to strengthen family planning and reproductive health services in eastern DRC as part of JGI's programs to promote environmentally sustainable economic growth and health in ecologically fragile areas. The DRC has the second largest rainforest in the world and has

abundant natural resources, but it experiences considerable stress from a growing population in need of meat, firewood, and new agricultural land. The DRC's many years of conflict, disintegration of political systems, and increased reliance on subsistence agriculture by a growing population with limited economic opportunities pose a threat to the country's great biodiversity and future development.

For further information on the ACQUIRE Project's work in the DRC, send inquiries to [mdohlie@engenderhealth.org](mailto:mdohlie@engenderhealth.org).

