

## **THE NEED FOR A REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH BILL**

The CIA World Fact book puts the Philippines as the 12<sup>th</sup> most populous country in the world today with 94.3 million people. Some sectors welcome this growth in population as potential human resource for the country. But it is also alarming in light of other data.

According to UNICEF, the country is among the 68 countries which contributed to 97% of maternal, neonatal and child deaths worldwide in 2009. Also, the Guttmacher Institute in 2009 reported that 3.4 million pregnancies occur every year: Half are unintended, one third of which end in abortions. The Philippine Legislators' Committee on Population and Development (PLPCD) revealed that in 2010, eleven Filipino women died every day due to pregnancy and childbirth-related complications.

The Family Planning Survey of 2006 reported that 2.6 million Filipino women would like to plan their families but lack information and access to do so. The poorest have an average of six children—three times their desired number. The NDHS in 2008 said that 54% of married women did not want an additional child but that 49% of them were not using any form of family planning method, leading eventually to miscarriages, induced abortions, unwanted births, and mistimed births. The lack of any kind of family planning translates to 85 pregnancies per 100 women.

**What do these figures mean for the nation?**

One, unless there is decisive intervention, it is very likely that we will not achieve our commitment to the UN Millennium Development Goal to reduce infant mortality and improve maternal and child health.

Two, given the continuing lack of access to safe methods of contraception, our poor married women will most likely continue to have unwanted pregnancies and resort to abortions. Already, more than half a million abortions are performed every year in this country, usually in back alleys and unsafe conditions, many ending in complications and death for the mothers.

It is this kind of situation that the Reproductive Health Bill seeks to remedy by providing access to a range of family planning options. Data from other countries show that the higher the use of contraception, the fewer the number of abortions.

On the economic front, studies show that controlled demographics yield a dividend of 15 to 20 percent increase in growth. Thailand, which had more or less the same Gross National Income per capita as the Philippines in 1969, has been able to reduce its population growth rate to a quarter of ours. It now has income that is at least 30% higher than that of the Philippines.

The five RH bills filed in the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress may not be all that we need to reduce poverty and maternal and infant mortality. But they will likely slow their dizzying climb.

*Adapted from Dr. Christopher Joseph L. Soriano's presentation during the 7<sup>th</sup> ISACC Fellows' Gathering. Dr. Soriano teaches at the Ateneo School of Medicine and Public Health.*