



COUNTDOWN TO SUCCESS: Building momentum with a Country Countdown

For countries striving to achieve the health-related Millennium Development Goals — and particularly MDGs 4 (reduce child mortality) and 5 (improve maternal health) — information is a powerful and essential force for change. Understanding which interventions are being delivered effectively and which are not, knowing the geographic areas where coverage levels are lagging, analyzing the impact of policies and programs on health outcomes, and ensuring accountability can all help build new momentum for national efforts to save women's and children's lives.

Every country can benefit from a Country Countdown. A Country Countdown can help policy makers, health programmers, and advocates to:

- Refine evidence-based national strategies
- Enhance the quantity, quality, and use of national and sub-national health data
- Efficiently allocate financial resources
- Increase attention and political commitment
- Achieve equitable, accelerated reductions in maternal, newborn, and child mortality

The Country Countdown is a practical way for countries to follow through on commitments to the Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health (*everywomaneverychild.org*) and A Promise Renewed pledges to end preventable child deaths (*apromiserenewed.org*). It enables countries to take stock, review recent progress, and identify remaining challenges and actions required to accelerate progress; and it fulfills the Commitment to Child Survival's pledge to "hold ourselves accountable for our collective progress." The Country Countdown process is led by in-country partners, aligned with national health strategies, and builds on ongoing efforts to strengthen accountability for fulfillment of reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health (RMNCH) commitments, in line with international accountability frameworks.

What does a Country Countdown do? A Country Countdown helps stakeholders learn from successes and understand and develop solutions for remaining challenges. It complements the

national RMNCH planning process, involves a broad range of partners (academics, NGOs, professional associations, parliamentarians, and the private sector as well as Ministry of Health, donors, and UN agencies), and focuses on key evidence-based interventions and policies. A Country Countdown report usually includes sub-national profiles and an equity analysis, enabling national health planning that more fully considers differences in needs and coverage levels. A Country Countdown can also help to develop consistent and compelling advocacy messages on how best to prioritize interventions, population groups, and geographic areas that are lagging behind.

Conducting a Country Countdown...What works? Experience in several countries provides important lessons in what makes a Country Countdown successful. In 2006 Senegal became the first country to hold a national Countdown conference, bringing together government leaders, private and public partners, and

THE COUNTRY COUNTDOWN: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- **Focus on data quality and data for action:** compile and analyze sub-national data on coverage for proven interventions and determinants of coverage; review and improve data quality
- **Consider full continuum of care:** recognize links across reproductive, maternal, neonatal, and child health (RMNCH) and nutrition
- **Align with country processes:** strengthen national institutions and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating progress
- **Involve all stakeholders:** Recognize government's key role, but involve independent technical experts and civil society to ensure inclusion and accountability
- **Use flexible approaches:** Begin with standard Countdown indicators and tools, but adapt to country's unique conditions, needs, and objectives
- **Ensure adequate funding:** Mobilize sufficient financial support for a successful Countdown process
- **Maintain ongoing process:** Ensure uptake of findings and conclusions into national policies and plans

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Organizing the Country Countdown:** A national organizing committee, led by the government, oversees the planning process. A scientific sub-committee is formed to identify and analyze data, create national profiles, and assist with development of messages and presentations; other sub-committees are responsible for event planning, communications, and fundraising. Committee members are from Ministry of Health and other government departments, academic and research institutions, NGOs, UN agencies, bilaterals and donors, professional associations, and the media.
- **Creating national and sub-national profiles:** Countries model their profiles on the Countdown to 2015 country profiles, adding more recent data as well as data and analysis on trends and geographic breakdowns.
- **Focusing on sub-national action:** Creating sub-national profiles engenders additional understanding, engagement, and opportunities for evidence-based action. Nigeria developed maternal and child health profiles for each of its 36 states, enabling development of strategies to address gaps and inequities.
- **Holding a national Countdown event:** Data are analyzed and presented to decision makers and the general public in clear and comprehensible profiles and reports, and at a national Countdown conference or workshop. Ideally, this is a multiday event with sufficient time for working groups to conduct in-depth discussions of findings. Participants come from a broad range of sectors, and key findings are shared with the media and public through press releases and briefings.
- **Organizing provincial or local events:** Organizing local events, with civil society participation, provides opportunities for wider learning and commitments to action, and leverages the sub-national profiles.
- **Developing recommendations, and following up on actions and outcomes:** Discussion and debate at Countdown events focuses on building consensus around priority actions. Stakeholder commitments provide a foundation for action, accountability, and follow-up, which is a critical part of the process.
- **Documenting the experience:** Clear and comprehensive reporting of findings, discussions, and commitments encourages widespread information sharing, improved understanding of RMNCH issues, and effective monitoring.

academics to develop a new child survival plan. Zambia held a national Countdown conference in 2008, resulting in important actions, including a significant expansion of national capacity for midwife training. Nigeria has embarked on a national strategy, with state-level profiles modeled on Countdown country profiles, to highlight geographic inequities and opportunities to make concrete progress on coverage. In those countries, the Country Countdown process has raised the profile of the health MDGs, helped build consensus on areas where progress has been slow, identified ways to overcome challenges, mobilized new partners, and made current partners more accountable for results. Countries have mobilized new commitments and increased resources, and developed more integrated plans that span the full continuum of care. Zambia and Nigeria are using Countdown approaches for continued monitoring and problem solving.



What now? Because every country starts with its own unique set of baseline conditions, policy and planning approaches, health objectives, and contextual factors, there is no single model for implementing a country Countdown. Each country should, with partners, determine the best approach for carrying out a Countdown that best contributes to improved analysis, action, and accountability in its own context.

Planning and carrying out a Country Countdown will require the investment of substantial time and energy by busy health planners and managers. Experience shows, however, that a country Countdown, integrated into the national health planning process, can add value, build new skills, engage new partners, drive improved results, and help save lives.

For more information and for detailed case studies of Country Countdowns, please visit www.countdown2015mnch.org.