Wellbeing Foundation Africa Calls for a Strategic Approach in Addressing the Challenges of Preterm Births and Highlights the Importance of Essential Commodities and Family Planning in Taking Action

With 15 million babies born too soon every year, preventing preterm births and saving the lives of preterm babies are certainly crucial maternal, newborn and child health (MNCH) priorities. So when the “Born Too Soon Campaign: The Global Action Report on Preterm Birth” was launched on the 2nd of May 2012, the Wellbeing Foundation Africa—a pan-African MNCH empowerment organization, was excited to see almost 50 international, regional and national organizations contribute to the production of the report, which represents best practice in public health models and protocols in line with Millennium Development Goal 8: Global Partnership for Development.

The “Born Too Soon” report emphasizes the following key messages that the Wellbeing Foundation endorses:

• 15 million babies are born too soon every year, with over 1 million of them dying due to preterm complications and surviving babies facing a life-time of disability.
• Rates of preterm births are rising in almost all countries; it is the second highest cause of death after pneumonia.
• Prevention of preterm births must be accelerated, without which the global progress in child survival and health by 2015 cannot be achieved.
• Premature babies can be saved now with feasible, cost-effective care.
• Family planning and increased empowerment of women, especially adolescents, can help reduce preterm birth rates.
• All individuals have a role to play.

The Wellbeing Foundation itself was born out of the pre-term experience of it’s Founder-President Mrs. Toyin Ojora Saraki, commenting on this issue she stated “My personal experience of the challenges of preterm birth, and for many years seemingly acting as a lone voice on behalf of millions of women across the world going through the same tragedy, makes me wholeheartedly welcome the “Born Too Soon” report. It brings down curtain on the 2nd biggest killer of infants today. My hope is however raised daily in seeing my oldest child, who is now 20 years of age and was born as an ‘extremely preterm,’ surviving twin, thrive as a healthy young adult today. This is a testament that the solutions which will keep over a million young souls alive every year exist. The report, far from a collection of papers, is a powerful tool in informing and mobilizing all stakeholders to do their part as clearly outlined within its pages.”

MNCH Essential Commodities

Ironically, almost three weeks after the launch of the “Born Too Soon” report, the Wellbeing Foundation Africa again experienced the challenges of preterm birth in an environment lacking maternal, newborn and child health commodities. On the 24th of May 2012 to be precise, 4 pre-term babies were born to Samuel and Joy Chukwukaelo weighing 0.9, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 kg respectively, at the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital (UITH), Kwara State, Nigeria through caesarean section. Asphyxiated at birth, the biggest baby died on Sunday the 27th of May, while the smallest of the quadruplets died on the 29th, despite the best efforts of the hospital’s medical team. The condition of the surviving two infants remained fragile but stable, and an SOS message was received by the Wellbeing Foundation Africa Founder, leading to the immediate dispatch of the WBFA Alaafia Kwara Twins and Multiple Births Assistance Unit which runs longstanding assistance programs at UITH as well as the Children’s Specialist Hospital Centre, Igboro—both in Kwara. Unfortunately, on the 2nd of June 2012, a third baby suffered a bleed and also passed away.

Informed by the supervising physician, the Wellbeing Foundation Africa from the onset noted that the current needs of the two surviving infants included antibiotics, fluid, diapers and most importantly, pre-term baby formula. Most of these essential commodities were accessible locally, but unfortunately, not the infant pre-term baby formula, which was a specialised product for hospital-use only. The mother of the quadruplets, a nursery school teacher earning N5,000 a month (approximately USD 32), and the father a petty trader, had little to no hope of acquiring this formula for her children, not only due to the lack of financial resources, but the unavailability of this formula in the Nigerian market or within the health system.

Given the current challenges within the Nigerian health system which includes lack of MNCH commodities, this tragic case highlights the importance of building global strategic partnerships in line with the UN Millennium Development goals and the Secretary-General’s call to action. This has been the strategic approach that allowed
the foundation to respond to the needs of the quadruplets in Kwara State, Nigeria. Only equipped with her phones, and most importantly her knowledge of maternal, newborn and child health care (MNCH) that spans two decades, the Wellbeing Foundation Africa Founder-President reached out to partners from an informed position, knowing what products were needed and where most likely to access it. An 8 hour search finally resulted in the acquisition of the pre-term formulas thanks to the world renowned Great Ormond Street hospital, London; and a fortuitous logistical arrangement allowed the product to be delivered to the hospital within 24hrs through the WBF Africa Executive Director, Mr. Temitayo Erogbogbo.

The experience of this young family illustrates the challenges within the Nigerian health system, the obvious lack of commodity illustrated by the absence of access to pre-term formula, but more critically the lack of information and early engagement by pregnant women within the health system. The Wellbeing Foundation Africa has long advocated for essential commodities for MNCH, most notably the IMNCH Personal Health Record (PHR)©. A key motive for the use of the PHR© is to encourage expectant mothers to more readily access maternal services, guiding them through antenatal, postnatal and childhood development up to the age of five. In the case of a potential complicated pregnancy and risk of preterm births such as a multiple pregnancy, this could be identified early to allow for closer monitoring and due preparation taken to minimise risk to both mother and babies.

The “Born Too Soon” report, championed by the foundation, highlights the growing number of preterm babies and their increasingly high contribution to annual neonatal deaths globally and in Nigeria. In Nigeria, there are 10-15 preterm births per 100 live births. It is therefore essential that there exists a strategic approach that includes building partnerships to cater for the preterm challenge as part of the country’s on-going effort to address its poor MNCH indices. The Wellbeing Foundation Africa hopes that the appointment of President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria as Co-Chair of the UN Commission on Life-Saving Commodities for Women acts as a catalyst to improving access to essential live saving commodities.

**Family Planning**

In line with a major recommendation within the “Born Too Soon” report, the Wellbeing Foundation Africa also continues to relay the importance of family planning as a key tactical component in addressing preterm births and the broader aims of Millennium Developments Goals 4 and 5. It was great to see family planning highlighted as a strategic focus in addressing this challenge, a view also shared by Dr. Julio Frenk, PMNCH Chair and Dean of Harvard School of Public Health, who expressed during the report launch, that family planning has a role to play in addressing each key preterm birth risk factor including: adolescent pregnancy, birth spacing, pre-pregnancy weight status, chronic diseases, poor mental deficiencies, intimate partner violence, infectious diseases, and tobacco use.

The Wellbeing Foundation Africa has taken action to emphasize the strategic importance of family planning in addressing MNCH indices which also reflect the rates of preterm births.

- The foundation has advocated for policy-makers to respond to the preterm birth challenge and recently participated in the 13th PMNCH Board Meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, where government and civil society organizations were urged to expedite action and fulfill their commitments to address preterm births.
- Working with the White Ribbon Alliance Nigeria, the Board of which is chaired by Wellbeing Foundation Africa Founder-President, Mrs. Toyin Saraki, the foundation has called for the network to share the findings in the “Born Too Soon” report with partners who will hold their local governments accountable regarding preterm care in Nigeria.
- The foundation has also increased focus on family planning through multi-stakeholder communications as a catalyst to drive strategic long-term change.
- The Wellbeing Foundation Africa continues to invite physicians and mothers to carry out reviews of best practice guidelines for preterm care in limited resource settings for both health workers and families under
- The foundation continues to develop creative ways to communicate the importance of family planning to all stakeholders in partnership with the private sector.
Advocacy and Action

Currently, the foundation disseminates life-saving health information on preterm births, the importance of family planning in preventing preterm births, and the vital role essential MNCH commodities play in saving the lives of preterm infants through the Wellbeing Foundation Africa 24-7-365 Advocacy and Action social media campaign. In addition to on-going advocacy, the foundation recently pledged to support the newly launched ‘Saving One Million Lives’ initiative, which was implemented by Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan to combat preventable deaths and help Nigeria reach Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 4 of reducing child mortality—which also includes preterm deaths. This commitment was part of a series of round-table discussions and high-level deliberations which took place during the United Nations Commission on Life-Saving Commodities for Women and Children meeting in Abuja, FCT between the 14th and 16th of October 2012.

Supporters of the United Nations Every Woman Every Child effort, the foundation continues to explore strategic partnerships and private sector alliances to ensure the reduction of both maternal and child mortality. As the global community celebrates World Prematurity Day on the 17th of November, the Wellbeing Foundation implores policy-makers and health professionals in Nigeria, in Africa, and in every country of the world, to adopt a strategic approach in addressing the challenges of preterm births. From a preventive standpoint, the importance of family planning cannot be over-emphasized. Likewise, in saving the lives of pre-term babies, the provision of essential commodities will make a live-saving difference. Putting our efforts together, let us take action on preterm births on World Prematurity Day and everyday.

Signed: Communications
The Wellbeing Foundation Africa
Email: communications@wellbeingfoundationnig.org
Web: www.wbfafrica.org
Facebook/Wellbeingafrica
Twitter/@wellbeingafrica
About The Wellbeing Foundation Africa

Founded in 2003 by Her Excellency Mrs. Toyin Saraki, the Wellbeing Foundation Africa (WBFA) is a leading frontline African Maternal Newborn and Child Health (MNCH) and empowerment organization, dedicated to transforming the lives of women and children through advocacy and action. WBFA achieves this goal by forming strategic partnerships and engaging local and international stakeholders while providing practical support interventions and tools such as the WBFA IMNCH Personal Health Record©. Committed to health, education, women’s empowerment and social welfare, WBFA promotes MNCH through the UN’s Every Woman Every Child effort, diverse multi-sector initiatives, and advocacy campaigns including WBFA 24-7-365 and the Millennium Development Goals Countdown to 2015.

For more information, please visit [www.wbfafrica.org](http://www.wbfafrica.org)