

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

July 13, 2012 at 11:07am

Gates foundation one of many to pledge money to expand contraception access

by Thomas C. Fox

Melinda Gates has pledged \$560 million as part of a campaign to expand access to contraception for women in some of the poorest countries in the world.

The funding commitment was unveiled Wednesday at the London Summit on Family Planning alongside other pledges that total \$4.6 billion from the British government and leaders from African nations, which are wrestling with the health and social problems brought on, they say, by high rates of unplanned pregnancy.

The summit, organized by the British government, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the United Nations Population Fund and other partners, is an initiative to give 120 million more women in developing countries access to voluntary family planning by 2020. To achieve this goal, summit participants say they aim to mobilize the political will and resources needed to increase the demand and support for family planning.

The pledged money includes \$2 billion from developing countries and \$2.6 billion from donor governments and other partners.

Melinda and Bill Gates have been supporting family planning efforts since first mulling over special causes to support in the mid-1990s. And Melinda, who told Reuters she and her husband are committed to the family planning campaign, said the funding is "on par" with the foundation's other big programs, which include the fight against AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis.

More than 320 organizations, groups and individuals from more than 80 countries have endorsed the London summit's call for greater family planning efforts. Summit participants say 220 million women in

the developing world who do not want to get pregnant cannot get reliable access to contraception.

According to conference participants, each dollar spent on family planning can save governments up to \$6 on health, housing, water and other public services.

And yet, they say, more than 200 million women and girls in developing countries who want to delay or avoid becoming pregnant or space out their pregnancies are not using effective methods of contraception, resulting in more than 75 million unintended pregnancies every year.

Family planning funding has drawn critical opposition from some Catholic groups who see contraception and abortion as part of the same issue. Other human rights groups, meanwhile, have expressed concerns that contraceptive programs can lead to forced sterilizations.

An interfaith group composed of leaders from various religious traditions issued a statement for this week's summit titled, "Interfaith Declaration to Improve Family Health and Well-Being." The statement called family planning a moral imperative.

"Each year lack of family planning services and education in developing countries results in an estimated 600,000 newborn deaths; 150,000 maternal deaths from abortion and other pregnancy-related causes; and at least 340,000 children lose their mother," the statement reads.

Meanwhile, five international human rights groups urged the summit leaders to ensure that any effort to increase the use of contraceptives is a part of a broader strategy to improve comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care and uphold sexual and reproductive rights for all women.

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"While contraceptive information and services are an essential part of the health services that women need throughout their lives, efforts to increase family planning services can have negative consequences if women's fundamental human rights and reproductive autonomy are not protected," the joint statement states.

Conference participants said by 2020, the collective efforts announced at the summit will result in 200,000 fewer women dying in pregnancy and childbirth, more than 110 million fewer unintended pregnancies, more than 50 million fewer abortions, and almost 3 million fewer babies dying in their first year of life.

In April, speaking in Berlin on the subject of contraception, Melinda Gates told her audience she was raised a Catholic and attended Catholic schools through high school. She said her mother's great-uncle was a Jesuit priest and her great-aunt was a religious sister. In high school, she said, the Catholic sisters made service and social justice a priority.

"In my work at our foundation, I believe I am applying the lessons I learned in school," she said.

"In the tradition of the great Catholic scholars, the nuns also taught us to question received teachings," she said. "One of the teachings most of my classmates and I questioned was the one saying that birth control is a sin."

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