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ASIA/NEPAL - Key role of the volunteers involved in health care, progress in maternal and child health care

Kathmandu (Agenzia Fides) - The women involved as volunteers in the health sector often provide a vital service for the poor who live in the mountainous regions of Nepal, and are those that have contributed to a steady improvement in maternal and newborn survival rates. This organization of volunteers (FCHVs) operates in the most remote areas of Nepal, where there are neither doctors nor health professionals. In the district of Dailekh, 600 km northwest of Kathmandu, there are 810, and across the country other 52 000. Dailekh Hospital, the largest medical center in the region managed by the government, often refers to information provided by FCHVs that help to record and collect data on the health of women and children. They are constantly in touch with the poor who find it difficult to walk miles to go to the hospital, and are considered "doctors". Although they are not able to handle medical complications, the volunteers hold a fundamental role for the reports and are able to convince pregnant mothers and young women to go to health centers, as well as provide them with basic information about child care.
Nepal has made progress with regard to maternal mortality rates (MMR). It is one of the 10 developing countries to have reduced mortality rate by at least 75% between 1990 and 2010. In 2010, about 170 women died for every 100,000 live births. The average varies between 100 and 290 deaths. In 1990, the MMR was 770 deaths per 100,000 live births. According to the most recent Demographic Health Survey (2011), between 2006 and 2011, the percentage of children assisted by skilled operators almost doubled, from 19% to 36%, while the percentage of children born in a health facility increased from 18 to 28% in the same period. The FCHV program was launched in 1988 in 19 districts in the poorest region of Nepal with the aim of improving maternal and newborn care. More than half of the volunteers have been working for over 10 years but, despite having such an mportant role, the government does not give them any financial support. Officials at the Ministry of Health in Kathmandu say they are doing their best to dedicate more resources to FCHVs, but are constrained by the budget. The FCHV volunteers still feel motivated in their work thanks to the respect of the community and the freedom to leave the house. (AP) (Agenzia Fides 29/10/2012)

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