

MDGS AND BEYOND: ARE WE MAKING PROGRESS?

Keynote Address

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Thank you so much! Maraming, maraming salamat sa inyong lahat!

A warm and pleasant morning to all. Magandang umaga po sa inyong lahat! Despite the rains, the clouds, the floods, the fallen trees and the brownout, I am truly honored to be the keynote speaker at this 32nd Annual Scientific Meeting of the National Academy of Science and Technology (NAST). I could not help but be overwhelmed by this invitation of NAST for me to give the keynote address. Indeed, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been very close to my heart every since they were declared in the year 2000. But first, let me give a tribute and in fact I really want to offer this lecture to the great scientific men and women, our esteemed scientists, who have shaped my life as a scientist and as a medical practitioner.

First and foremost, I would like to pay tribute to my mentor, Professor Solita Camara-Besa. It goes without saying that National Scientists Mercedes Concepcion and Gelia Castillo are my best friends in the health social sciences. Another professor of mine, National Scientist Lourdes Cruz, taught me biochemistry. I would also like to give honor to our National Scientist, Former Chancellor Dr. Ernesto Domingo. Acd. Emil Javier has also been my guide along with Acd. Angel Alcala, Acd. Quintin Kintanar, former Health Secretary Dr. Alberto Romualdez, Acd. Reynaldo Vea, Dr. Mahar Mangahas who taught me about surveys and statistics, Acd. Fabian Dayrit, and of course, my good friend, Acd. Jaime Montoya, with whom I work on the Philippine National Health Research System. Greetings to all of you whose names have not been mentioned but have touched my life as a scientist.

Indeed, it is good that the NAST has chosen the MDGs as this year's ASM theme. There were close to 190 of the world's leaders who met in New York in 2000 and declared that something must be done not only by the policy makers but also by the scientists, researchers, professionals, and communities, particularly the poor, to have genuine human development. We have barely five more years until 2015. We are lagging behind in some of the MDGs.

The first MDG is for cutting in half or more the 1990 level of poverty and hunger by 2015. The second is education for all, particularly girls and women. The third is for gender equality and women empowerment. The

fourth is to reduce child mortality. The fifth is to lower maternal mortality and improve maternal health. The sixth is to effect a significant change in the prevalence of Tuberculosis, Malaria, HIV/AIDS, and other infectious diseases in the country, the seventh is to ensure environmental sustainability and the last is to have global partnerships to sustain whatever gains will be made in the MDGs.

The Scientists and the MDGS

This is the biggest assembly of scientists. What is the score? I think this is what we intend to see in the next two days. But what is the real score? We always expect that advancements in science, in technology, in health, in education, in engineering, will lead to improvements in the quality of life of the people, particularly the poor. But is it really reaching the people? Are we reaching out to the communities? Are the researches, the evidence-based studies that have been undertaken truly geared towards the MDGs? Are they really touching the ground, particularly at the community level, the remotest areas, the poorest areas, and the uneducated?

Every time I look and we will see this in the next two days. When it comes to poverty and hunger, we probably know the causes of these. But have we ever gone to the communities to really find out why people are not eating, why people are continuously malnourished? I am quite sad that the latest National Nutrition Survey of 2008 has shown an increase, rather than a decrease, in the underweight for age, in the stunting, in the wasting of our children below 12 years of age. There has been no improvement in the last five, even in the last ten years, when it comes to the situation of our children in terms of malnutrition. When we look at his generation or at least a third of all Filipinos who currently compose the cohort of 0-12 years old with persistent and acute malnutrition, think of what this generation will be a decade from now in term of human development. As I look at the cohort survival rates in terms of the goal in education, it has not even reached 70 percent, meaning to say that out of the hundred children who enroll in Grade 1, only 69 finish Grade 6. What happens to the 31? In the past 25 years, this has not changed. It has always been at the level of 60, 63, 66, and 69; never have we exceeded 70. We cannot even say that 7 out of 10 who enter Grade 1 will complete Grade 6. And the scientific studies reveal that they do not even drop out in Grade 4 or Grade 5 or even Grade 6. The three who drop out, drop out in Grades 1 and 2. This means that 3 out of 10 Filipinos who drop out every year are technically illiterates and enumerates. This is the quality of our human resources, human productivity in the next generation.

To top it all, maternal mortality ratios have not changed in the last decade despite advances in science, in obstetrics, in technology, even in engineering. We have not achieved or even lowered the maternal mortality ratios in this country. It continues to be 11 mothers dying daily due to pregnancy and childbirth. That means that every day, 11 families are orphaned by the death of a mother. We all know that it is the biological mother who is important in the care of children to be upright citizens and also nourished and educated. Just think of these three MDGs: Why are we lagging behind in the cohort survival rates as the key indicator of educational attainment? Why are we lagging behind in terms of poverty and hunger with malnutrition worsening in the last five years? Why do Filipino mothers continue to die every day?

Today, 11 mothers will die. Will that reach the newspapers? Will that call the attention of scientists? The last study on maternal mortality ratio or causes of death of Filipino mothers was done 25 years ago by a woman scientist who is not present here. I would like to recognize her, Dr. Solita Halcona, who has been my inspiration. Why are we not doing another study, a 21st century study, on why mothers are dying? As scientists, we depend on DOH, but when we look at it, mothers are dying because of hemorrhage, abortion, but when you look at the overall figure, 40 percent die of still unknown causes. Unknown cause, probably because even health workers were not present at the time of death.

I think a new leadership is needed to achieve the MDGs. However, when we look at the scorecards for financing evidence-based policies, with regard to the MDGs, we are all wanting. The Philippine National Health Research System of Acad. Montoya has done so much work. So much baseline has been undertaken and we know that we are not even reaching the international benchmark for financing health. What more for a global fund? What more for national funding for research and development? Recently, in a ministerial conference in Cairo, it was agreed that developing nations like the Philippines should devote at least one percent of their countries' GDP to development across all sectors. I am not only speaking of health but all the sciences. The European Union pledged that all developed nations give three percent of their GDP for research and development to remain economically competitive. The GDP in 2009 was US\$161 B. At the current rate of exchange of Php46/US\$, this translates to Php7.4 trillion. If we just get one percent, it means we need Php74 billion for R&D. I was asking USec de la Peña how much the DOST budget was. Even if we combine other departments, we will not reach the prescribed amount for general R&D. We are meeting today and tomorrow to discuss the role of scientists in meeting the MDGs but when will we be supported by financing. Research requires

funds. I think this is where we should put our heads together so that when we really think of evidence-based studies we really think also of the financing to do it. I think we scientists, policy makers, researchers, teachers and students who comprise this audience today should each have a role in advocating that R&D get the financing it needs. This is the biggest hurdle because this new government is faced with a larger than Php300 billion budget deficit. Another Php300 billion is lost to corruption. We are also spending more than Php900 billion to just pay the interest rates and debts due to the global community.

MDGs, the Communities and the People

Where are the scientists and researchers? At the start, I am glad that Acd. Emil Javier reminded all of us what the role of NAST is. Acd. Javier included the Philippine President and the public in his welcome remarks. But what we would like to see when it comes to the MDGs is a good review of the NAST because the government has changed in the last 15 years. We are now devolved because mayors and governors are now the heads of local governance. Shall we include here that NAST also dialogue with mayors and governors, particularly when it comes to the achievement of MDGs? That is a question I pose for these two days of meetings! I would really like to see NAST having a face-to-face dialogue with governors and mayors. What if this hall was full of newly-elected local officials who are the implementers, the key actors in the MDGs? When we talk to the governors and mayors, it should not isolate us from talking with the communities and indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, the marginalized. What about out-of-school youth? Are we in continuous dialogue with them so they can understand how scientists can bring them back to literacy and how they can be helped to become good upright citizens?

The MDGs and the Inequities

I plotted the mother's education against the achievement of children's immunization (Fig. 1). We can see how important mother's high school education is to their understanding of immunization. This means that even if a mother is an elementary graduate it would be difficult for her to understand the concept of immunization. Similar plotting was made for the five regions where we are least likely to achieve the MDGs (Fig. 2).

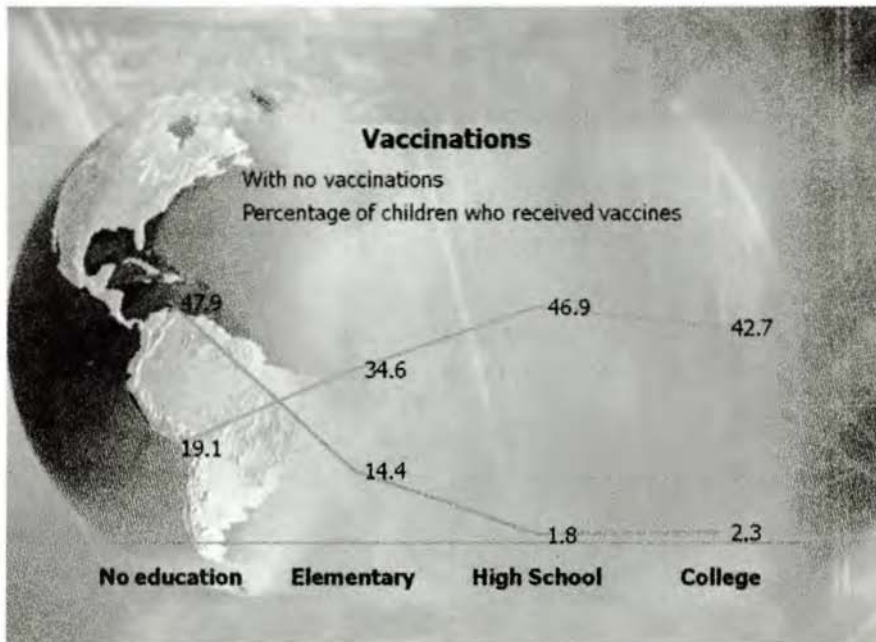


Figure 1. Vaccinations of Children and their Mother's Educational Attainment.

Source: 2008 National Demographic Health Survey (NDHS)



Figure 2. MDGs and Inequities: The Regions least likely to achieve the MDGs.

When we go to contraception there is basically no difference between an elementary and a HS graduate in terms of contraceptive usage (Fig. 3). To understand contraception, one requires basic education. This is a far cry from those who drop out in Grades 1 or 2.

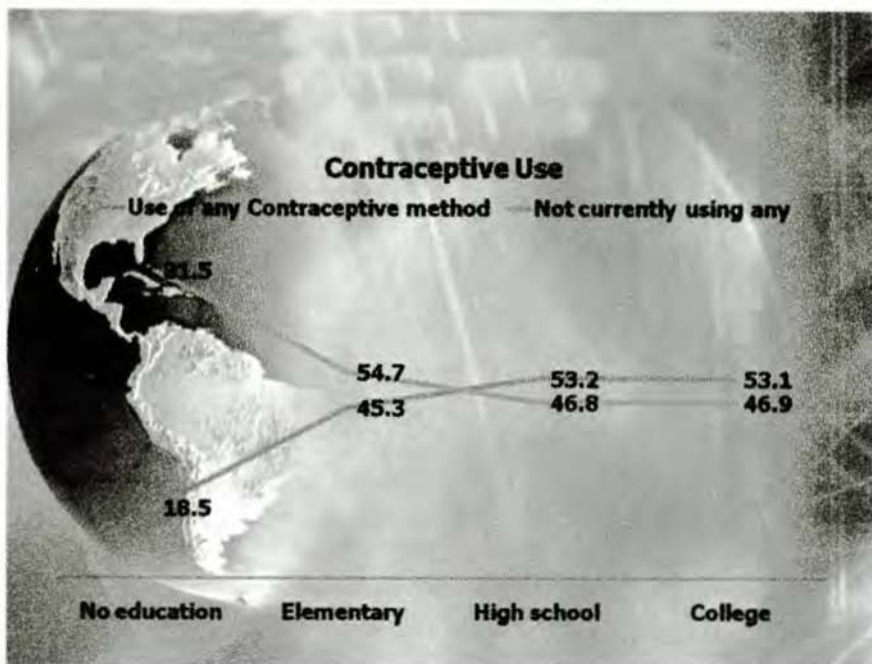


Figure 3. Use of Contraception by Women of Reproduction Age and their Educational Status, 2008 NDHS

Once mothers complete Grade 6, it is easier for them to understand not only contraception but also HIV/AIDS. But when you look at those with no education, then you see the worst of all! (Fig. 4).

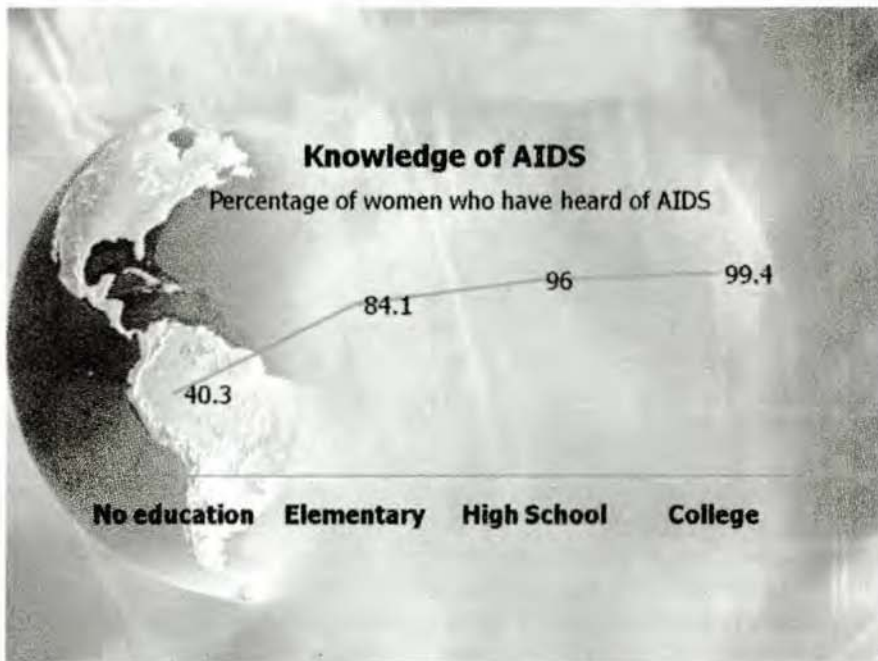


Figure 4. Knowledge AIDS of Women of Reproductive Age of and their Educational Status. 2008 NDHS

Challenges

Let me therefore end and leave you with five challenges that we should confront in the next two days. Challenge 1: Let us produce evidence-based research on why hunger and poverty remain in those regions and those provinces mentioned here. Let us really make a study on why cohort survival rates are worse in these areas, particularly in Muslim Mindanao where 7 out of 10 children drop out of school. In MIMAROPA it is five out of five. In Samar it is also five out of five. Why? Have we ever asked why? We always say this is because they are poor but why are they poor? Why do they continue to remain poor? Why do they continue to be isolated from Grade 1 or Grade 2?

Challenge 2: As to maternal mortality ratios—despite modern obstetrics, modern contraception, why are the maternal mortality ratios still high? I would like to also add sustainable sanitation which is MDG 7. It has not been brought out that in this country, 25 million families continue to have no toilet, 25 million families continue to use the open fields. I think that as

scientists we abhor this situation. We should like to declare 2015 as the year when every Filipino family will have access to a sanitary toilet connected to a septic tank that is regularly dislodged and treated accordingly. When I go to Samar, Cotabato, Zamboanga or even Ifugao, it is inevitable that you will see people defecating in the open fields.

Challenge 3: We need research translation not only to the President, not only to the Cabinet, not only to our Congressional Representatives but also to our mayors and governors. I hope to see the day when the NAST will dialogue with 80 mayors or even at least with the mayors of those 10 provinces listed earlier. If only selective, talk to the mayors of Biliran, of Antique, of Abra, for example. Probably, we will be a better nation, five years from now.

Challenge 4: NS Lourdes Cruz was just telling me that she is working with indigenous people and this is what we would like see other scientists doing. I am currently working with the Bilaans of South Cotabato. It was quite puzzling that the Bilaans who are now affected by the largest mining investment in the country, the Sagittarius Mining Co. do not know what the consequences will be to their community, to their ancestral lands and sacred places, once the Tampakan or Sagittarius Mines begin operations. The Bilaans are not against the mining operations, they know they will benefit, but they are ignorant of the negative and positive effects. I was just there a month ago and will be there again next week to remind the Bilaans. In fact, the tribal leader texted me this morning to ask if he and his group can go to Manila to bring what is happening to their tribe to the attention of policy makers. Let us create a dialogue with the communities as scientists particularly those we know will not achieve or probably not even reach the MDGs. In the matter of funding, I would like to mention Acd. Montoya's great passion to have the Philippine National Health Research System financed consistently and sustainably, through an Act of Congress. I hope we will all rally for this to happen.

Challenge 5: Let this body ensure that the new national leadership will commit itself to the MDGs. I think for most of us who have been working on the MDGs, probably the inaugural address of the President on 30 June 2010 was a letdown because the MDGs were not even mentioned. This President is the MDG President as he will be president in 2015, the target year of the MDGs, when he will report to the global community leaders if we have achieved the MDGs. The President will deliver a State of the Nation address in a matter of two weeks and we hope that this body will ensure that the MDGs will be mentioned then.

Thank you very much. Maraming salamat po!

Mabuhay ang National Academy of Science and Technology!

