

October 23, 2008

Kent Hill
Assistant Administrator for the Bureau for Global Health
U.S. Agency for International Development
RRB 3.06-072
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20523-3100

Dear Mr. Hill,

As international HIV/AIDS, human rights, faith-based, reproductive health and development leaders committed to the sexual and reproductive health and human rights of women, men and youth globally, we are writing to express our deep concern over USAID's recent decision to interfere with Marie Stopes International's (MSI) access to contraceptive supplies in Africa. We ask you to rescind your instructions to U.S. Missions to urge host governments to ensure that U.S.-donated contraceptive supplies do not reach MSI. National health systems are already over-burdened. To impose an onerous task such as separating out donated contraceptive supplies is unjust and violates the rights of individuals to enjoy—and impedes government commitments to provide—the highest attainable standard of health.

According to MSI, the USAID decision will “seriously disrupt” family planning programs in at least six African countries—including Ghana, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe—leaving women and families with fewer family planning and HIV prevention options. The countries being targeted by USAID have some of the highest rates of unmet need for family planning, not discounting high HIV/AIDS prevalence, and the impact of such a decision will be devastating.

USAID has responded that the cut-off of supplies to MSI will not result in an increase in unintended pregnancies or maternal deaths because the supplies will be re-routed to other aid groups in those countries. However, a majority of MSI's family planning impact is in rural, underserved areas where women are particularly vulnerable to illness and disease as well as unexpected pregnancy. To deny them supplies will indeed have a grave impact on access for women and their partners.

The motion to ban contraceptive supplies to MSI under the guise of the Kemp-Kasten Amendment is unfounded. Marie Stopes International does not support coercive abortion or involuntary sterilization in China or elsewhere. Rather, the organization is a leader in increasing the availability of voluntary, client-centered family planning services in China and in countries around the world. Moreover, organizations such as MSI that do not receive U.S. funding were surely never intended by Congress to be a target of the Amendment.

We wholeheartedly urge you to reconsider USAID's instruction to African countries that they take measures to ensure that no U.S.-donated contraceptive supplies reach Marie Stopes International. As MSI is one of the world's leading family planning organizations, this decision is sure to have a detrimental impact on women who need their services the most. This decision not only undermines the sovereign decision-making of these governments, but it also weakens U.S. efforts to reduce maternal deaths in developing countries. Furthermore, it unfairly politicizes women's health and rights while also putting their lives in jeopardy.

Sincerely,

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