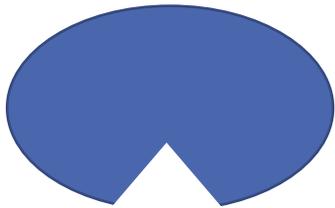


# ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING CHILD & MATERNAL MORTALITY

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## Why are anthropological approaches important for maternal & child health?

In the contemporary world anthropological approaches have made important methodological contributions to public health actions, especially regarding the use of ethnography for the systematic collection of field data. Medical anthropology, in particular, has provided contributions to understanding illness and disease as dynamic and adaptive in regards to child and maternal health. Anthropological approaches also help identify context-specific factors that contribute to poor child and maternal health.

In the papers presented at the symposium ethnographic findings were shared and provided reliable data for further research.

## Background

The Anthropological Approaches to Understanding Child and Maternal Mortality, and Recommendations for Improving Health Outcomes Symposium invited social science researchers to share their evidence-based insights on maternal and child health in Ethiopia. They were also encouraged to provide recommendations on ways to improve health outcomes.

The symposium aimed to understand child and maternal mortality across all of Ethiopia and each paper presented gave regional insight into this complex issue. The need for the symposium was driven by the high maternal and child mortality rates in the communities surrounding the host university, Haramaya University.

In nearby Kersa District the under-5 mortality rate is estimated at 80-120 deaths per 1000 live births (KHDSS, 2015) and the maternal mortality rate is 324 deaths per 100,000 live births (Assefa, 2018). Assefa (2018) suggests that the district's high maternal mortality rates are caused by health concerns during pregnancy, and qualitative research presented at the symposium indicates that there is low or late antenatal care uptake amongst pregnant women (Tadesse and Taye, 2019).

Additional ethnographic research presented at the symposium suggests that high mortality rates are partly due to a pattern of low health seeking behaviour, general untrustworthiness and suspicion of biomedical health interventions, and minimal health infrastructure at government health posts and centres (Degefa and Tadesse, 2019). Given this high burden rate the symposium was vital in providing anthropological approaches to understanding demographic data.



## Key points on child & maternal mortality in Ethiopia

- According to the 2016 Ethiopian demographic health survey the national under- 5 mortality rate is 67 deaths per 1,000 live births and infant mortality is 48 deaths per 1,000 live births (EDHS, 2016).
- In Eastern Hararghe, Ethiopia the Kersa Health and Demographic Surveillance (KHDSS) verbal autopsy data shows that the under 5 mortality rate is 80-120 child deaths per 1000 live births (KHDSS, 2015).
- According to World Health Organization (2015) estimates, the maternal mortality ratio in Ethiopia is 353 per 100,000 live births; below the sub-Saharan average of 546 per 100,000 live births.
- In Ethiopia 1 in every 35 children dies within the first month, 1 in every 21 children dies before celebrating their first birthday, and 1 in every 15 children die before reaching their fifth birthday (EDHS, 2016).
- Kersa HDSS surveillance data shows a cumulative average maternal mortality ratio of 324 per 100,000 live births (2018).
- The 2016 Ethiopian demographic and health survey indicated that 38% of children under age 5 are considered short for their age or stunted and 18% are severely stunted (EDHS, 2016 ).

## Public health messages from the symposium

- Showing respect and empathy towards the research community, and building trust amongst individual health stakeholders ought to be a key priority before any biomedical intervention can be implemented
- Co-developing community-based health activities is necessary for the practicality, implementation, and acceptability of any intervention
- Public health interventions should align with community needs and values, and should respect cultural and religious practices
- Community-based nutritional knowledge is vital to sensitively address challenges related to low health-seeking behavior and early discharge in cases of child malnutrition
- To reduce stillbirth public health officials need to take a holistic approach that not only includes biomedical skill and know-how, but also knowledge about mystical beliefs regarding women's bodies and birth.



## The need for further ethnographic research:

The concluding discussion at the symposium indicated that there is a lack of in-depth, qualitative research on health seeking pathways in rural Ethiopian communities. Much of the public health discourse on indigenous health beliefs and practices is moralizing, and in turn is not well understood by health researchers. Symposium participants made a commitment to learn about child and maternal health through non-judgmental and participatory approaches to research.