

Call for Expressions of Interest

Strengthening Systems for Safer Childbirth

Collective action to accelerate progress in ending preventable maternal deaths

Merck for Mothers is launching a new multi-sectoral initiative that aims to accelerate progress towards Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3.1 by investing in locally-led collective action to strengthen health systems.¹ We are seeking Expressions of Interest from organizations with roots in sub-Saharan Africa or Southeast Asia that will work in coalition with local partners across sectors – government, private and/or civil society – to implement and evaluate evidence-informed solutions that will result in a measurable and sustainable reduction in maternal deaths and, by extension, stillbirths and newborn deaths, in specific geographic areas defined at the state, district, county or city level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has stretched national health systems to a breaking point, hindered access to maternal health services and worsened maternal health outcomes.² At a time when funding and resources for maternal health are under pressure, the global health community must work collectively in support of locally driven sustainable solutions to augment health system capacity, increase health system efficiency, responsiveness and resiliency and improve maternal health outcomes.³ **Strengthening Systems for Safer Childbirth** will create a co-funding and community of practice platform that supports local implementing coalitions.

Expressions of Interest will state the leading challenges to achieving sustained improvements in maternal health in the select geography, as identified by women and girls living in that region, and propose place-based solutions that local organizations will drive, building on local strengths. The focus should be on improving access to quality maternal health services, informed by women’s needs and preferences. Proposed solutions may involve high-quality integrated service delivery including family planning, strengthening networks of care, data connectivity and digital inclusion, client engagement and community support, and/or financing and affordability of care.

Each coalition of organizations submitting an Expression of Interest should consider how to:

- Integrate contributions from the local private sector – care providers, innovators and entrepreneurs – into health systems to augment health system capacity and improve maternal health outcomes
- Deploy scalable solutions that strengthen networks of care and directly address local health system challenges and gaps that prevent women from receiving safe, high-quality, coordinated and respectful care across the pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum continuum, regardless of where they seek care. This includes engaging sectors beyond health that affect health (e.g., WASH, education, gender, etc.)
- Collaborate and coordinate with government as well as help break down silos to create more resilient eco-systems for health
- Incorporate the expressed needs, recommendations and leadership of women and girls who are most at risk of maternal mortality and help to advance more equitable maternal health outcomes
- Unify and catalyze multistakeholder action to harness innovative approaches, shared learnings and best practices that improve maternal health outcomes

¹ SDG target 3.1 is to reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births by 2030.

² Shapira, G., Ahmed, T., Drouard, S. H. P., Amor Fernandez, P., Kandpal, E., Nzelu, C., ... & Friedman, J. (2021). [Disruptions in maternal and child health service utilization during COVID-19: analysis from eight sub-Saharan African countries](#). *Health Policy and Planning*.

³ Health Systems Governance and Financing WHO Team. (2020) [“Engaging the private health service delivery sector through governance in mixed health systems: summary report of the WHO Advisory Group on the Governance of the Private Sector for Universal Health Coverage”](#) WHO



- Leverage additional sources of funding and creative financing models (e.g., pay for performance, blended financing, public-private partnerships) to support sustainability

Expressions of Interest are due on November 15, 2021. On December 15, 2021, we will invite a limited number of applicants to develop full proposals. An external advisory committee will help assess applications.

Merck for Mothers expects to award a select number of three-year grants, of up to \$1M a year, to the initial cohort of Strengthening Systems for Safer Childbirth coalitions in May 2022.

BACKGROUND

Merck for Mothers is our company's initiative to help create a world where no woman has to die while giving life. We collaborate across sectors – working with governments, community-based and non-governmental organizations, patient groups, professional associations, UN agencies, research institutions, social entrepreneurs and other businesses – to improve the health and well-being of women during pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period. When a mother is healthy, receives high-quality maternity care and has a safe delivery, we set the foundation for children, families, communities and societies to thrive for generations to come. Since our launch in 2011, we have reached more than 13 million women through programs promoting safe, high-quality, respectful care.

Merck for Mothers will build on its 10 years of experience, learnings and success in catalyzing innovative public-private partnerships – including [Saving Mothers Giving Life](#) (a comprehensive health system strengthening initiative with the U.S. government); the [MOMS Initiative](#) (an innovative financing collaboration with the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation); Safer Childbirth Cities (a collaboration with eight co-funders to improve maternal health equity in the U.S.); and [Project CHAMPION](#) (a collaboration with the WHO and Ferring Pharmaceuticals to address postpartum hemorrhage) – to shape and implement this new initiative.⁴

⁴ Safer Childbirth Cities initiative has been selected as a finalist in the health category for Fast Company's 2021 list that recognizes medical innovations that saves lives, extend longevity or increase access to care.

THE STRENGTHENING SYSTEMS FOR SAFER CHILDBIRTH INITIATIVE

What will coalitions do? | Multi-sector coalitions will identify the most serious gaps in health system response that are preventing women from receiving safe, high-quality, coordinated and respectful care and implement tailored solutions to address them. Proposed activities should build on local strengths and leverage pre-existing investments and programs, respond to community needs, advance more equitable maternal health outcomes, reflect the inclusion and engagement of women most affected by maternal mortality, integrate the local private sector and be evidence informed.

What will coalitions achieve? | Coalitions should focus on sustainable solutions to make measurable strides in reducing maternal mortality. Specifically, coalitions should support health systems to consistently deliver quality care which will generate broad benefits, including improved health outcomes for all pregnant women and new mothers, improved patient satisfaction with maternal health care and more equitable access to quality care across mixed (public, not-for-profit and private) health systems.

Who will be part of these coalitions? | Merck for Mothers welcomes coalitions that include organizations from across sectors and disciplines. Successful coalitions will [leverage the reach, resources, expertise and innovation from the local private health sector](#) – from private health providers who deliver antenatal and childbirth services to local entrepreneurs who bring innovation to service delivery through data, financing, digital platforms, transport and coordination systems, logistics, etc. – to improve maternal health, advance more equitable maternal health outcomes and help save more women’s lives. The local private health sector is often an untapped, valuable resource to help augment health system capacity and improve health system efficiency, responsiveness and resiliency – critical to achieving better patient outcomes, meeting the SDGs and realizing universal health coverage.⁵

How will coalitions work with Merck for Mothers and others? | The coalitions selected to participate in the Strengthening Systems for Safer Childbirth initiative will receive funding through grants or other mechanisms (for example, blended financing) from Merck for Mothers and/or other co-funders of the initiative. These coalitions will participate in a Community of Practice to facilitate shared learning and support and generate evidence to demonstrate impact and potential for sustainability at scale.

CALL FOR EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

Merck for Mothers is seeking Expressions of Interest (EOI) from coalitions mobilized to implement solutions to reduce maternal deaths in a specific geographic area with high maternal mortality. The EOI should be submitted by a lead organization and include the names of organizations that will be members of the coalition. **Preference will be given to coalitions based in states, districts, counties or cities within these focus countries - Kenya, India and Nigeria – but other countries in sub-Saharan Africa will also be considered.**

Members of coalitions should:

- Be actively engaged in efforts to improve maternal health that have demonstrated impact
- Have helped advance maternal health equity through meaningful integration of women’s needs, preferences and perspectives in the design, implementation and evaluation of solutions

⁵ Health Systems Governance and Financing WHO Team. (2020) [“Engaging the private health service delivery sector through governance in mixed health systems: summary report of the WHO Advisory Group on the Governance of the Private Sector for Universal Health Coverage”](#) WHO



- Have experience and mechanisms in place for soliciting community input and feedback and integrating community-driven solutions into programs
- Have a track record of successfully engaging with governments, public health systems, private sector and/or other relevant stakeholders
- Be committed to sustaining their programs/initiatives, including willingness to experiment with innovative investment models to ensure financial sustainability
- Leverage digital technology – as part of capacity building – to enable continued performance improvement and program responsiveness, as well as to promote accountability in delivering results
- Be willing to share data transparently to understand measurable results and contribute to ongoing real-time learning
- Be open to actively participating in a Community of Practice (e.g., sharing learnings, successes, failures, best practices, etc.)

To submit an Expression of Interest, please prepare a concise response (three pages maximum in Microsoft Word plus an appendix as noted) that answers the following questions and is included with a completed Request for Information Form (see pg. 8):

1. What is your proposed geographic focus area and what are the characteristics and drivers of maternal mortality and morbidity in that region?
2. What current efforts are underway to address these drivers? *(Please limit your response to questions 1 and 2 to no more than half a page.)*
3. What solutions, interventions or activities do you propose to introduce to accelerate progress?
4. How does your suite of solutions complement – and ultimately link with – other efforts (including those in the public sector) to advance equitable access to high-quality, safe, respectful maternal health care?
5. How will your proposed intervention(s) integrate the local private sector to strengthen health systems?
6. What experience and expertise does your organization have to develop and implement these solutions? *(The response to this question may be included in an appendix.)*
7. Please complete the following table describing the organizations you propose including in your coalition and why? *(Please include all the organizations that will have an active role. This table may be included in an appendix.)*

Coalition member	Rationale for including	Your past and/or current relationship	Role of each member	Activity(ies)	Intended result

8. How do you plan to measure and demonstrate results and impact on maternal health and what are examples of the types of indicators you may use?
9. How do you plan to financially and operationally sustain your solution(s) beyond the three-year grant period?

Following the review of EOIs, Merck for Mothers, with input from an external advisory committee, will identify a group of finalists and invite them to submit a full proposal and budget. Detailed budgets are not required at this

stage. Merck for Mothers expects to award a select number of three-year grants, of up to \$1M a year, to the initial cohort of Strengthening Systems for Safer Childbirth coalitions.

Note: The initiative will only fund one coalition in a particular state, district, county or city. Individual organizations may be included in more than one EOI, including EOIs from the same geography.

ELIGIBLE ORGANIZATIONS

Merck for Mothers is able to provide funding to non-governmental and for-profit entities. Organizations may be headquartered in the U.S. or other countries but must have operations in the country selected for the Strengthening Systems for Safer Childbirth initiative. Preference will be given to lead organizations based in sub-Saharan Africa or Southeast Asia.

The following activities and organizations are not eligible for Merck for Mothers funding support:

- Activities or organizations that directly influence or advance Merck's business (commercial) or marketing interests, including purchase/influence of purchase of Merck products
- Political organizations, campaigns and activities
- Engagement/payments of government officials and government agencies (which in many cases could include hospital employees in government-run facilities)
- Payments/incentives/benefits going to health care providers or facilities (including teaching hospitals)
- Major infrastructure improvements
- Purchase of supplies or equipment unrelated to this project or program
- Direct clinical care and purchase of pharmaceutical products
- Payment of staff salaries or other costs not involved in this project or program
- Organizations that discriminate on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, religion, age, national origin, veteran's status or disability
- Robust governance and financial controls, including two years of audited financial statements

SUBMISSION OF EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

Applicants should submit their Expressions of Interest via email to CSTMFORMOTHERS@merck.com by November 15, 2021 at 11:59PM ET. It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that files are complete and transmitted by the deadline. The applicant bears full responsibility for data errors or omissions.

Review & Notification Process

Applicants may submit any questions about the Call for EOI by October 4, 2021 by 5:00pm ET to CSTMFORMOTHERS@merck.com. A call will be organized to respond to all questions in October.

A selection committee will review all Expressions of Interest. Merck for Mothers will notify applicants of the status of their application on December 15, 2021.

Selected organizations will be invited to submit a full proposal. Full proposals will be due March 31, 2022.

Issuance of this Call for Expressions of Interest does not constitute an award commitment on the part of Merck for Mothers, nor does it commit to pay for costs incurred in the preparation and submission of applications. Further, Merck for Mothers reserves the right to reject any or all applications received.

SUMMARY OF KEY DATES

Sept 14 th 2021	Announcement and release of Call for Expressions of Interest
October 4 th 2021	Deadline to submit questions on Call for EOI
October 20 th and 21 st 2021	Strengthening Systems for Safer Childbirth hosts FAQ call to answer questions (Register here to sign up for the FAQ call)
Nov 15 th 2021	Expressions of Interest due
December 15 th 2021	All applicants notified of status Select EOIs invited to develop full proposal
March 31 st 2022	Proposals due
May 15 th 2022	Applicants notified of decision
July 15 th 2022	Announcement of first cohort of Strengthening Systems for Safer Childbirth
July 15 th 2022	Launch of Community of Practice

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION FORM

In addition to your three-page EOI submission and appendices, please complete the following request for information form as the cover sheet to your EOI.

Basic Information on Lead Organization/Social Enterprise:	
Organization name:	
Organization address:	
Contact name:	
Contact phone #:	
Email address:	
Country of incorporation:	
Primary organization website:	
Primary organization’s mission:	
Financial and Leadership Information:	
Type of organization (e.g., international non-governmental organization/non-governmental organization/charitable org, private corporation, publicly traded company, partnership, other):	
Years in business:	
Annual income (in USD) for current year and previous two years: <i>*For international non-governmental organization/non-governmental organization, Merck for Mothers is unable to provide funding that exceeds 50% of an organization’s operating budget</i>	
List senior management/ executive and Board of Director names:	
Indicate which executives/Board of Directors are government officials, if any, and describe type:	