

INVESTING IN CHILDREN'S HEALTH: A critical component of child wellbeing

Health is one of the most important components of a child's wellbeing and a potentially powerful mechanism of building human capital, generating sustainable growth. As well as the intrinsic value of improving child wellbeing through better health, there is a clear economic case as investing in health programmes have shown high returns. Estimates indicate that the benefit-cost ratio of integrated child development and health programmes would be as much as \$US 2.38 for every dollar invested in the programmeⁱ.

Most deaths among children are avoidable, yet neonatal death, malaria, diarrhoea and pneumonia remain the major causes of child mortality in Africa. Such avoidable mortality, in general, accounts for about 87% of the total chance of death among children under five in low-and-middle income countriesⁱⁱ.

Children's health in Africa today

The good news: The last ten years have witnessed encouraging improvements in many African countries and investment in the health sector has paid off for some parts of the region. Immunisation coverage, nutritional status, treatment of illnesses and infant mortality have all significantly improved. Progress includes;

- Significantly increased immunisation coverage, for example, with Angola, Cape Verde, Congo (Brazzaville) and Niger showing 40-75% increases in measles immunisations between 2005-2008
- A decrease in the proportion of malnourished children in Africa by about 4% since 2006
- Impressive improvements in child survival rates in countries previously known for high levels of child mortality such as Liberia, Niger and Sierra Leoneⁱⁱⁱ.

The bad news: Despite positive developments, the overall state of health of Africa's children is still woefully inadequate on many levels;

- An estimated 12 out of every 100 children in Africa die before reaching five years of age^{iv}
- Africa accounts for half of all under-five deaths in the world^v
- One in 6 children in Africa suffers from malnutrition^{vi}
- Access to health services is lamentably low, for example, only 48% of children with pneumonia (a potentially fatal illness) are taken to appropriate health providers for treatment – a level 10 percentage points lower than the global average^{vii}
- Some 30% of the population in Africa still do not have access to clean drinking water – the majority of whom are children^{viii}.

Africa's track record in investing in child health^{ix}

- Africa continues to have a relatively low level of investment in health with an average/median in 2008 of an estimated 9% of total government expenditure
- There are huge differences within the Africa region – from Rwanda spending nearly 19% of its total budget on health, whilst Nigeria and Burundi spent only approximately 3.5% and 2.4% respectively
- Between 2004-2008 the majority of African countries did increase their investment in health. Liberia, for instance, increased its health spending substantially with an annual average rate of some 40%
- Madagascar, Niger and Senegal have also made considerable incremental increases in health budgets of, on average, between 20-30% between 2004-2008
- Conversely, the health budget declined on average by about 15% per year in Malawi and in Swaziland by 10% between 2004-2008
- In some countries health budgets remained almost unchanged, including in the Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.

Are African governments meeting their health targets?

The African Child Policy Forum (ACPF) used three key health commitments and targets as the benchmarks for evaluating governments' investment in children's health and to measure progress in the region;

The Abuja Declaration agreed in 2001 included a commitment by African governments to spend 15% of their national budget on health. Eight years on, only four countries have reached that target - Liberia, Rwanda, Tanzania and Zambia^x.

The **WHO Commission for Macroeconomics and Health** estimated that a minimum of \$US34 per person per year was required to provide minimum health requirements in low income countries. In 2008, 17 countries in Africa spent less than this recommended minimum. For some highly populated countries with very low GDP, even meeting the Abuja commitment of spending 15% of budgets on health may not generate sufficient funds to meet the \$US 34 per person target.

The health MDGs include important targets on child and newborn health. Currently it is estimated that Africa would have to spend more than 12% of its GDP on health to achieve the MDG targets. Yet average spending on the health sector in Africa is less than half of this^{xi}. Six years away from the 2015 MDG target of reducing under-five mortality by two-thirds from its level in 1990, nearly half the countries in Africa have child mortality levels more than double this^{xii}.

What African governments need to do

- Continue and renew commitment and solidarity on improving child health in Africa
- Increase the level of investment in children's health which currently falls far short of regional and international health financing targets
- Expand health facilities making them widely accessible to all children and mothers, including those with disabilities and those living in rural areas who are often excluded from such services
- Ensure investments in health are translated into health outcomes by improving efficiency and addressing issues of governance, resources, accountability and systemic factors that affect the effective utilisation of health budgets.

ⁱ World Bank 2009

ⁱⁱ Based on data from World Health Organization (WHO), 2008

ⁱⁱⁱ WHO World Health Statistics 2010, WHO, Geneva; UNICEF 2008, State of the World's Children 2009: Maternal and Newborn Health, UNICEF, New York

^{iv} Rajaratnam, J., Marcus, J., Flaxman, A., Wang, H., Levin-Rector, A., Dwyer, L., Costa, M., Lopez, A. and Murray, C. (2010). Neonatal, post neonatal, childhood and under-5 mortality for 187 countries, 1970-2010: A systematic analysis of progress towards MDG 4, The Lancet, Vol 375, Issue 9730, Pages 1988-2008

^v UNICEF 2008, State of the World's Children 2009: Maternal and Newborn Health. UNICEF, New York

^{vi} World Health Statistics 2009, WHO Geneva

^{vii} The State of the World's Children: Special Edition, Celebrating 20 Years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF 2009, New York

^{viii} UNICEF and WHO 2010, Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation: 2010 Update, New York and Geneva

^{ix} Based on data from WHO National Health Accounts (2010)

^x Based on data from WHO 2010 and IMF 2009

^{xi} African Union (2009). African Common Position on Social Integration: Africa's contribution to the 47th UN Commission on Social Development, New York

^{xii} Based on data from the African Development Bank (2009); UNICEF (2010).