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Fewer newborns dying worldwide but progress too slow, say UN and partners



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A new study by the United Nations health agency and its partners has found that fewer newborns are dying worldwide but progress is too slow and Africa in particular is being left further behind.

“The first week of life is the riskiest week for newborns, and yet many countries are only just beginning post-natal care programmes to reach mothers and babies at this critical time,” the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) said in a news release.

Newborn deaths decreased from 4.6 million in 1990 to 3.3 million in 2009, and fell slightly faster in the years since 2000, according to the study, led by researchers from WHO, Save the Children and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and published today in the medical journal PLoS Medicine.

The study, which covers 20 years and all 193 WHO member States, found that newborn deaths – deaths in the first four weeks of life (neonatal period) – today account for 41 per cent of all child deaths before the age of five.

Almost 99 per cent of newborn deaths occur in the developing world, with more than half taking place in just five large countries – India, Nigeria, Pakistan, China and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

India alone has more than 900,000 newborn deaths per year, nearly 28 per cent of the global total, WHO noted. Nigeria, the world's seventh most populous country, now ranks second in newborn deaths – up from fifth in 1990.

Africa has seen the slowest progress of any region in the world, with a reduction of just 1 per cent per year, the agency said. Among the 15 countries with more than 39 neonatal deaths per 1,000 live births, 12 were from the WHO African Region – Angola, Burundi, Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, and Sierra Leone – plus Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia.

At the current rate of progress it would take the African continent more than 150 years to reach United States or United Kingdom newborn survival levels, according to WHO.

The agency noted that an increase in investment in health care for women and children in the last decade – when the anti-poverty targets known as the Millennium Development Goals ([MDGs](#)) were set – contributed to more rapid progress for the survival of mothers and children under the age of five than for newborns.

Three quarters of neonatal deaths around the world are caused by pre-term delivery, asphyxia and severe infections, such as sepsis and pneumonia. WHO pointed out that two thirds or more of these deaths can be prevented with existing interventions.

“Newborn survival is being left behind despite well-documented, cost-effective solutions to prevent these deaths,” says Flavia Bustreo, WHO Assistant Director-General for Family, Women's and Children's Health.

“With four years to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, more attention and action for newborns is critical,” she said, referring to the 2015 target date for achieving the MDGs.

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