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Smallpox eradication a great lesson for global action against disease – UN



Children in Tajikistan after being vaccinated. [File Photo]

17 May 2010 – Global health challenges facing the world can only be overcome through collective efforts similar to the international campaign that resulted in the eradication of smallpox three decades ago, the head of the United Nations health agency said today.

“That official death certificate for an ancient scourge [smallpox] marked an unprecedented achievement in the history of public health,” said Margaret Chan, the Director-General of the UN World Health Organization (WHO), in a keynote speech during the 63rd World Health Assembly in Geneva.

“An initiative that broke every single chain of virus transmission in every corner of the world was the ultimate example of universal coverage. This tells us what collective action for a common cause can achieve. It provided dramatic proof of the power of collective action to improve the human condition in a permanent way.”

She said that international efforts to combat disease and strengthen health services must focus on the poor, stressing that improving people’s health was key to poverty alleviation strategies.

“Reaching the health-related [Millennium Development] Goals is not about national averages. It is about reaching the poor, who are almost invariably the hardest to reach,” Ms. Chan said.

“To put it bluntly, if we miss the poor, we miss the point,” said the Director-General. “We have a long way to go, especially for maternal and newborn mortality, and we welcome the efforts being made, on multiple fronts, to accelerate progress in this area,” she added.

The eight MDGs, as the Goals are commonly known, commit countries and their development partners to making efforts to end extreme poverty by 2015, as well as to combat hunger, maternal and child mortality, disease, inadequate shelter, gender inequality and environmental degradation.

Ms. Chan said that increased investment in health was bearing fruit and gave the example of the fact that since the start of this century, the number of deaths of children under the age of five had dropped to below the nine million mark for the first time in nearly six decades.

The number of people in low- and middle-income countries receiving antiretroviral therapy for HIV/AIDS rose from under 200,000 in late 2002 to the four million currently, Ms. Chan said.

She lauded the international effort to make vaccines more readily available to poor communities, noting that vaccination prevented an estimated two to three million deaths each year.

Ms. Chan said WHO and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), in close collaboration with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, countries and partners, had initiated a process to define the scope of the “Decade of Vaccines” launched earlier this year when the Foundation pledged \$10 billion for the programme, over the next ten years, to help deliver existing vaccines and develop new ones.

Ms. Chan called for increased investment in basic health systems, infrastructure, staff training information systems, regulatory capacity and systems for social protection to ensure that successes in the fight against disease are sustained.

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