



Funding, commitment gaps threaten gains in curbing measles deaths, UN warns



A child being vaccinated against measles

3 December 2009 – Global measles deaths have fallen by 78 per cent within the past decade, with vaccinations saving some 4.3 million lives, but the disease could make a deadly comeback if funding and political will are not sustained, a United Nations-backed study warned today.

All regions except South-East Asia – where India alone, with its 1-billion strong population, accounted for three out of four measles deaths in 2008 – have achieved the UN goal of reducing measles mortality by 90 per cent from 2000 to 2010, two years ahead of target, according to the Measles Initiative, a partnership led by UN and United States organizations.

Overall, the annual number of deaths worldwide has plunged from an estimated 733,000 in 2000 to about 164,000 last year.

But the Measles Initiative cautioned that a let-up in effort could send annual deaths surging to more than half a million in 2013.

“So much has been achieved in the past several years thanks to the hard work and commitment of national governments and donors, but with only two years until the target date, there are signs of stalling momentum,” UN World Health Organization (**WHO**) Director-General Margaret Chan said.

“This is a highly contagious disease that can quickly take advantage of any lapse in effort,” she added, citing a funding gap of \$59 million for 2010.

Immunization experts fear the combined effect of decreased political and financial commitment could result in an estimated 1.7 million measles-related deaths between 2010 and 2013, stressing that even the current reduced rate of 450 deaths a day is still hundreds too many for a disease that can be easily prevented.

In the hold-out region of South-East Asia, which beyond India includes heavily populated Indonesia and Bangladesh, measles deaths declined by only 46 per cent between 2000 and 2008, with delayed implementation of large-scale vaccination campaigns in India largely accountable for the lack of progress.

“Three out of four children who died from measles in 2008 were in India,” UN Children’s Fund (**UNICEF**) Executive Director Ann M. Veneman said. “India’s plan to scale up its measles vaccination campaign in many parts of the country is very encouraging.”

Kathy Calvin, Chief Executive Officer for the UN Foundation, a public charity created in 1998 with entrepreneur and philanthropist Ted Turner’s historic \$1 billion gift to support UN causes, noted that more children than ever are scheduled to be vaccinated in 2010.

“Next year, some of the most populous countries – China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Viet Nam, Nigeria, and Ethiopia – are planning national immunization campaigns. We’re looking at a pivotal year for measles vaccination and the financial commitments haven’t kept up with the demand,” she stressed.

Measles is among the world’s most contagious diseases and one of the leading causes of death among children. Even the healthy and well-nourished, if unvaccinated, are at risk, with pneumonia, diarrhoea, and encephalitis among the severe complications. But in vulnerable populations the disease is deadly.

The Measles Initiative – a partnership launched in 2001 and led by the UN Foundation, UNICEF, WHO, the American Red Cross and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – provides technical and financial support to governments and communities on vaccination campaigns and disease surveillance worldwide.

It works with several key partners, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the Japanese Agency for Development Cooperation, among others.

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