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## Head of UN agency calls for ‘fairness’ in global health policies



WHO chief Margaret Chan and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (right) at media briefing 15 June 2009 – The head of the United Nations public health arm today urged senior government officials to place “fairness” at the core of decisions to protect the most vulnerable against major worldwide crises.

Global warming, hikes in fuel and food prices, the economic meltdown and now the A(H1N1) influenza pandemic hit hardest in developing countries, said World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) Director-General Margaret Chan.

There is growing recognition that “blind faith in economic growth and gain as the be-all, end-all, cure-for-all has been misplaced,” Dr. Chan told senior government officials and international experts attending the Secretary-General’s Forum on Advancing Global Health.

“Fairness, I believe, is at the heart of our ambitions in global health,” said Dr. Chan. A failure to put equality at the centre of health-care policy decisions is “one reason why the world is in such a great big mess.”

She characterized globalization as a rising tide that lifts “the big boats, but swamps or sinks many smaller ones,” adding that the financial crisis has “proved highly contagious and this contagion showed no mercy and made no exceptions on the basis of fair play.”

Even the level of preparedness for and capacity to cope with the A(H1N1) influenza outbreak in recent months are strongly biased towards wealthy countries, Dr. Chan told the gathering at UN Headquarters in New York.

“Differences in income, life expectancy, and opportunities are greater now than at any time in recent history. These extremes of privilege and misery,” Chan noted, are often “a precursor for social breakdown.”

After addressing the Forum, she [told reporters](#) that “health investment will bring economic progress and more wealth.”

In his opening [address](#) to the Forum, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that healthy people have improved life expectancy, go to school, are more productive, take fewer days off work, have lower birth rates and thus invest more in fewer children.

“Health is the tie that binds all the Millennium Development Goals [[MDGs](#)] together,” he said, referring to the globally agreed anti-poverty targets with a 2015 deadline.

Eradicating poverty, illiteracy and the other challenges the MDGs seek to tackle will not be met without reaching the health targets, said Mr. Ban. “That is why global health is a top priority for me.”

Underscoring the need for strengthening efforts to improve maternal health, with an estimated global loss of \$15 billion in productivity due to maternal and newborn deaths, Mr. Ban said that there is “no better investment than safe-guarding the lives of mothers.”

He added that the international community should apply its experience of fighting AIDS and malaria to saving mothers’ lives. “We know that when governments, UN entities, businesses and civil society leaders join forces, we can have a powerful impact.”

Meanwhile, Deputy Secretary-General Asha Rose Migiro [told](#) a gathering launching the 2009 Report of the Global Campaign for the Health MDGs that in too many parts of the world, when a “woman goes into labour, relatives and friends do not go so far as to say goodbye, but they are often thinking, is this the last time they will see her?”

Highlighting the role women play at the “economic heart of the developing world,” Ms. Migiro noted that women in “Africa carry on their heads, or in their arms, two thirds of all the goods transported around the continent.”

She added that women also produce 80 per cent of Africa’s food and grow 90 per cent of the rice in Southeast Asia. “And because they are raising children – all across the world – women are also the key to a sustainable future.”

However, she said that some 1,400 women die each day in childbirth in the developing world and stressed that almost all of these deaths could be prevented.

“Globally, we need an estimated one million extra health care workers to provide the services needed to reduce maternal and child mortality,” a goal that sounds daunting, but achievable if the world “pulls together,” said Ms. Migiro.

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