Feature

Vital signs: the UN and global health

The UN has long promoted the principles of good health. It is not only the first responder, providing life-saving assistance in humanitarian emergencies, but also works to find solutions to the assorted health challenges people around the world face every day - from breastfeeding and access to medicines to HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. Here New World sets out the UN's major global health initiatives



World Health Organization

As the UN's lead health agency, WHO provides international leadership and coordination on public health issues, sets international medical standards and offers technical support in 150 countries. Its stated priorities are:

- Universal health coverage: ensuring access to basic services and financial protections for those taken ill
- International Health Regulations: preparing the global system to respond effectively to public health emergencies
- Access to medical products: ensuring medicines are safe, affordable and effective
- Social, economic and environmental factors: working to reduce the causes and drivers of diseases
- Non-communicable diseases: coordinating a coherent response on the global, regional and national levels
- Health-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): providing countries with support in meeting these targets

WHO also helps raise awareness of critical but often neglected issues. In recent months it has shone a spotlight on global rates of suicide, worsening antibiotics resistance and the unmet need for end-of-life care, as well as coordinating the response to the Ebola epidemic in West Africa.

United Nations Children Fund

Improving the health of the world's children is a core objective for UNICEF. Its work has saved countless lives over the years, particularly in relation to:

- Immunisation
- Oral rehydration for infants with severe diarrhoea
- Preventing HIV infection in newborns
- Micronutrient supplements
- Health education and training
- Using insecticide treated mosauito nets

UNICEF also works to improve services provided by government and health ministries. It recently held a workshop in Liberia on improving healthcare for newborn babies, and in 2013 ran a campaign in China calling for improved public facilities for breastfeeding mothers.

In humanitarian emergencies, UNICEF works to protect the rights, dignity and well-being of children and their families. It provides immediate, life-saving interventions such as vaccinations and stocks of essential household items, as well as ensuring children undergo as little disruption as possible to their long-term education.

Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS

UNICEF

UNAIDS is the lead organisation for the international response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It coordinates the efforts of 11 UN bodies, and describes its current strategy as getting to zero - "zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination, zero AIDS-related deaths".

This is broken down into a number of key objectives. including targeting at risk groups. such as men who have sex with men, reducing the number of tuberculosis deaths (TB is the biggest killer of people living with HIV/AIDS) and increasing the

availability of antiretroviral therapy (the HIV-suppressing drugs), which currently only reach 40 per cent of those who need them.

UNAIDS collates and analyses global data on the epidemic, making vital recommendations on how best to tackle the disease. Despite recent gains (see next page), UNAIDS's Gap Report warns against complacency. estimating that if prevention and treatment efforts remain at 2013 levels, the number of new infections will reverse course and begin to rise.

UNDP

UNAIDS

young people.



WBG

United Nations Population Fund Dedicated to improving sexual, reproductive and maternal health, UNFPA works in 150 countries, "delivering a world where every

pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, and every young person's potential is fulfilled". The challenge is vast: 800 women die in pregnancy

or childbirth every day, and the MDG on

maternal health is unlikely to be met by the

UNFPA's work focuses on practical interventions, such as training healthcare

contraceptives in emergency situations and humanitarian crises, and providing comprehensive sexuality education to

workers in family planning services, supplying

UNFPA also works with communities to challenge sensitive cultural norms that govern various social practices, such as gender roles

related to providing care in the home, female genital mutilation/cutting and the treatment of

> **World Bank** Group

> > Provides financing and support to help countries to reduce poverty levels and expand their healthcare services.

World Food Programme and the Food and **Agriculture Organization**

food security, hunger nutrition worldwide

UN Development Programme Contributes to global health

UNFPA

by working to raise people out of poverty and improve their overall quality of life.

WFP FAO

> Both focus on tackling crises and improving

UNEP

Addresses a range of environmental risks to human health, such as air pollution, oil spills and waste management.

UN Environment

Programme



HIV/AIDS

Progress in the fight against HIV/AIDS has been dramatic

in recent years: AIDS-related deaths have fallen by 35 per cent since 2005 and new infections have fallen 38 per cent since 2001.

There are, of course, regional variations. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for nearly 25 million of the total of 35 million people living with HIV, but infections there have declined by 33 per cent since 2005. While new infections are on the decline globally, they have risen by four per cent and seven per cent in Eastern Europe and Central Asia and the Middle East and North Africa respectively.

In addition to this, more than half of people living with HIV do not know their status. Three out of five people with HIV are not receiving treatment. Prevalence is particularly high among key at-risk populations: for example, prisoners are 50 times as likely to have HIV than the rest of the population. Clearly much more remains to be done if the world is to meet UNAIDS's goal of ending the epidemic.

To meet this challenge, resources worth \$19bn were available for combatting HIV/AIDS in 2013, significantly higher than the \$3.8bn spent in 2002.

FACTS

Since 1995, providing HIVsuppressing drugs (ART), has averted



7.6 million deaths globally, including



4.8 million deaths in sub-Saharan Africa alone



Providing ART to pregnant women with HIV has prevented

900,000

new infections amongst children since 2009



Sexual, reproductive and maternal health

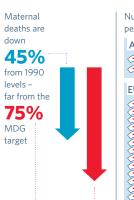
Sexual, reproductive and maternal health has featured

prominently on the international agenda since the landmark 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. Efforts made since then to link health with women's rights are still considered controversial. For many, however, the focus of MDG 5 – to reduce maternal mortality by three quarters and achieve universal access to reproductive health – was disappointingly narrow.

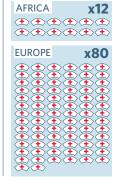
Yet despite these seemingly uncontentious targets, progress has been lacking. The reasons are simple: women do not have access to crucial healthcare services during childbirth. In 2011, over a third of live births took place without a healthcare professional present.

This situation is inextricably linked to women's low status in many societies. The UN estimates that improved access to family planning alone would avoid unintended pregnancies and cut maternal deaths by up to a third. It also recognises the importance here of "social barriers including women's limited autonomy ... early marriage; and women's constrained reproductive and sexual choices".

FACTS



Nurses and midwives per **10,000** people



Child survival

Child mortality, like maternal mortality, received a

standalone goal in the MDGs. In this case, there has been only marginally more progress toward the target of reducing under-five deaths by two thirds (MDG 4).

The vast majority of child deaths are due to largely treatable and preventable conditions, including pneumonia, diarrhoea and measles. Many of these could be prevented with low-cost, targeted interventions and improved health facilities, such as vaccinations and

the provision of specialised care in the first 24 hours after birth. And when children survive these illnesses, they can still suffer malnutrition, stunted growth and other long-term development problems.

Child and maternal mortality are, understandably, often tackled in unison. The UN's "Every Woman, Every Child" campaign seeks to mobilise and coordinate the various funds, agencies, governments, business and civil society working to achieve MDGs 4 and 5.

FACTS

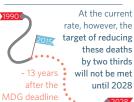


The child mortality rate has been

halved

6 million fewer

children died in 2012 than in 1990





Universal health coverage

WHO's priority goal of universal health coverage

(UHC) is a modest one – everyone should be able to obtain the health services they require without suffering financial hardship. WHO Director-General Margaret Chan has called UHC "the single most powerful concept that public health has to offer". Unfortunately for many, this remains a lofty aspiration, with healthcare either out of reach or prohibitively expensive.

UHC is expected to be included in the successor to the MDGs – the Sustainable Development Goals – to be adopted at the UN next year. Achieving this relies on strengthening the capacity of governments, but it also requires increased healthcare investment, reducing the current global shortfall of over 10 million health workers and ensuring that health services are both integrated and available throughout the different stages in people's lives.

FACTS

40%
of the world's
population
has no
healthcare
coverage, and
in low-income
countries this
can rise to

When people do have access to health services, they may still have to pay. It is estimated that

40% of global health expenditure is borne by the sick themselves