



PRESS RELEASE

Global financial crisis stands as greatest threat to improving access to health for the poorest and most vulnerable – UN

Geneva, 3 July: More than 300 delegates, including health/development ministers and heads of civil society groups, international financial institutions and the private sector, will gather in Geneva from 6 to 9 July for the annual UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) High-Level Segment. These leaders will review and recommend how the world, in the face of the global financial crisis can maintain and accelerate its commitment to global public health and ensure that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are achieved.

The High-Level Segment of ECOSOC, under the leadership of the Council President, Sylvie Lucas of Luxembourg, will be opened by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Other high-profile figures to address the meeting include Swiss Confederation President Hans-Rudolf Merz and Princess Muna al-Hussein of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. This year's Annual Ministerial Review, a high-level forum within the ECOSOC High-Level Segment, will focus on implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments regarding global health.

In a report to guide discussion at the Annual Ministerial Review on global health, Secretary-General Ban said that health remains at the very heart of internationally agreed goals and is a critical pre-condition for progress on most MDGs. He said that the downturn in the global economy is likely to unravel the gains achieved in the past decade, and in some instances the reversal has already begun. The crisis will affect all countries, but will have a disproportionate impact on the poorest and most vulnerable peoples.

HEALTH INEQUITIES

It is likely that the financial crisis will accentuate existing inequities in health across the board that have persisted among and within countries. Most of the difference is attributable to the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. Underlying problems of gender inequality are a crucial part of these inequities, reflected in the great differences in the health of women and girls, who are often lagging behind men and boys.

The report says that, among the areas where health inequities are evident, there is lack of progress on maternal and newborn health. In 2005, more than half a million women died as a result of pregnancy-related complications. Ninety-nine per cent of these deaths occurred in the developing regions, with sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia accounting for 86 per cent of them. Maternal and newborn health are both areas that lack sufficient resources, the necessary political will and high-level leadership. Greater investment in well-managed health systems, particularly primary care, is essential if progress is to be made.

About 1.2 billion of the world's poorest populations continue to suffer from the crippling effects of neglected tropical diseases. Though the diseases are largely preventable and treatable, they persist, almost exclusively, among poor people living in the least developed areas of the world – in part because they are regularly ignored by profit-driven research and development efforts.

It is therefore particularly important in this period of economic downturn to increase investment in the health and the social sectors in order to improve access to health for the poorest and most vulnerable. The report notes that a commitment to universal coverage not only protects the poor, but is the most affordable and efficient way of using limited resources.

MORE COMMITMENT NEEDED FOR HEALTH

The report points out that health systems are weak in far too many countries, as a result of decades of poor planning, poorly thought-out investment, and poorly coordinated aid: “They are weak because of a long-term failure to invest in basic health infrastructures, services, and staff,” says the report.

In response to the state of fragile and ineffective healthcare systems, the report says that it is more important than ever that unwavering commitment of development aid for the health sector as well as significant national budgetary allocations for health be honoured. “We will also have to find smarter ways of working with limited resources. New technologies offer huge potential for doing more in a resource constrained environment,” says the report.

Pointing out the vivid disparities that have emerged in the recent past, the report says that the most disturbing aspect of the state of global public health is the persistence of inequities in health outcomes. Differences in life expectancy between the richest and poorest countries exceed 40 years, the report says, and this partially reflects populations’ access to health services.

The report urges all governments and political leaders, in this time of financial and economic crisis, to maintain their efforts to strengthen and improve the performance of their health systems, and protect the health of their people, especially the poorest people most in need.

The report warns that the consequences of inaction will be enormous for public health and will lead to increased malnutrition, child and maternal mortality and morbidity, and communicable diseases.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH

The Secretary-General’s report says that changes in the climate are lengthening the transmission seasons of important vector-borne diseases (e.g. malaria, dengue fever), and altering their geographic range. This potentially brings such diseases to regions which lack population immunity and/or a strong public health infrastructure. Over time, the report warns, climate change could exacerbate shortages of potable water worldwide, which will inevitably have a profound impact on human health.

The report also warns that yields from rain-fed agriculture in some African countries could be reduced by up to 50 per cent by 2020. Extremely high air temperatures can kill directly, as was the case in Europe during the summer of 2003, when an estimated 70,000 excess deaths took place as the result of extreme heat. By the second half of the current century, the report anticipates that such extreme temperatures will be the norm.

“To minimize the increase of health risks, to facilitate the achievement and maintaining of MDG goals, to help communities cope, particularly those most vulnerable, it is an imperative that the intergovernmental negotiations on climate change under the UNFCCC are successful with regard to mitigation of and adaptation to climate change,” says the report.

AID, TRADE AND DEBT RELIEF

The report emphasizes that aid, trade and debt relief are all vital for developing countries, which are already burdened with strained financial circumstances and competing needs. Total official development assistance (ODA) flows from donor countries increased to US\$ 119.8 billion in 2008 from US\$ 103.7 billion in 2007.

In recent years, total aid for health from official and private sources has more than doubled, standing at around US\$ 16.7 billion in 2006, up from US\$6.8 billion in 2000, and the report urges governments not to drop the ball on global health.

“Without urgent improvements and long-term commitments to strengthen and improve the performance and capacity of health systems, the health-related MDGs will be difficult to achieve,” says the Secretary-General’s report.

The report has identified the need to strengthen health systems as a critical area that needs concerted action across and beyond the United Nations system, and the Secretary-General has asked a group of agency leaders working on global health to address this as a priority issue. He has emphasized in particular the lack of doctors, nurses and other medical personnel and the importance of social health protection, such as health insurance, which is essential to protect the poor from catastrophic out-of-pocket healthcare expenditures, which push an estimated 100 million people below the poverty line each year.

The Secretary-General applauded the recent large-scale global health initiatives such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, the Global Alliance for Vaccines Initiative (GAVI), and PEPFAR, among others, which have been successful in getting considerably more funds to countries for select diseases and interventions. He said the challenge now is to scale up and strengthen services for health beyond these initiatives.

BACKGROUND ON ECOSOC

ECOSOC coordinates the work of the 14 UN specialized agencies, ten functional commissions and five regional commissions, receives reports from ten UN funds and programmes and issues policy recommendations to the UN system and to Member States. The 54-member Council meets every year, alternating between New York and Geneva. The President of this year’s Council is Ambassador Sylvie Lucas, the Permanent Representative of Luxembourg to the United Nations.

In addition to Ministers and senior officials from Member States and UN agencies, funds and programmes, other delegates attending the talks will include World Health Organization Director General, Margaret Chan; UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, Sha Zukang; World Bank Vice-President, Joy Phumaphi; WTO Director-General, Pascal Lamy, UNCTAD Secretary-General, Supachai Panitchpakdi; Executive Director of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, Dr. Michel Kazatchkine; International Monetary Fund Deputy Managing Director, Murilo Portugal; and the Special Advisor of the Secretary-General on Innovative Financing for Development and Chair of UNITAID, Philippe Douste-Blazy.

The Annual Ministerial Review seeks to advance and assess progress made in the implementation of the UN development agenda, including the MDGs, as defined through a series of conferences and summits since the 1990s. The Review will serve as a high-level forum, for political engagement and knowledge exchange, and aims to produce a Ministerial Declaration endorsed by all participants.

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