

Population Facts

United Nations
Department of Economic and Social Affairs
Population Division | www.unpopulation.org



December 2017

No. 2017/6

Africa unlikely to achieve SDG target on child mortality without unprecedented effort to accelerate progress

1. Achieving target 3.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires countries to reduce the level of child mortality to no more than 25 deaths per 1,000 live births by 2030

The 2017 revision of the *World Population Prospects*, the latest forecast by the United Nations, suggests that, in 2030, the level of child mortality in Africa—that is, the number of deaths below age five per 1,000 live births—will be around 54 per 1,000 live births, more than double the SDG target of 25 per 1,000. In contrast, Asia is projected to meet the target by 2030; Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and Oceania had achieved this target before 2015; and Europe and Northern America, before 2000 (figure 1).

Worldwide, estimates of child, or “under-five”, mortality are more reliable than those of life expectancy at birth or any other indicator of mortality. Projections of child mortality are based on historical trends and other considerations, notably concerning the future course of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its diminishing demographic impact.

2. In 2015, under-five mortality in Africa was strikingly higher than in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Oceania

In 2015, the level of child mortality in Africa was 80 deaths per 1,000 live births, which was strikingly higher than in Asia (35 per 1,000), Latin America and the Caribbean (22 per 1,000) and Oceania (25 per 1,000). In regions with high levels of under-five mortality, the percentage of deaths that occur at ages 65 and above is low—for example, only 25 per cent in Africa in 2015. In the same year, this percentage was around 58 in Asia, 56 in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 70 in Oceania. As old-age deaths become dominant in all regions except Africa and thus the focus of global health interventions shifts toward the non-communicable diseases striking mostly at older ages, the particular situation of Africa requires special attention.

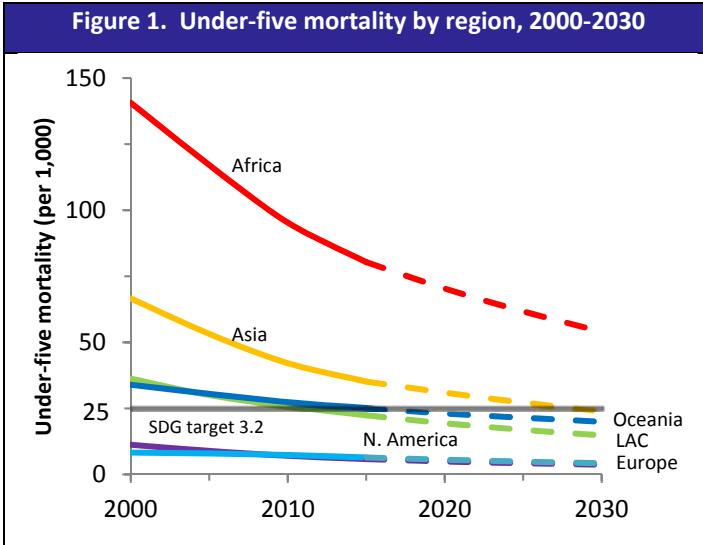
3. Given levels of child mortality in 2015, whether African countries will achieve SDG target 3.2 will depend on their average annual rate of mortality reduction in the period from 2015 to 2030

Although further progress in reducing child mortality risks is anticipated, the average annual rate of decline in under-five mortality for Africa in the period from 2015 to 2030 (grey bar in figure 2) is projected to be substantially smaller than what was observed in the period from 2000 to 2015 (black bar in figure 2). This slowdown in progress is to be expected; it is attributable to the heightened challenges of reducing child mortality once the easiest gains have been achieved.

For Africa to achieve the target of 25 per 1,000 in 2030, the average annual rate of decline in under-five mortality from 2015 to 2030 would need to accelerate to about 8 per cent. Since that pace of decline is significantly faster than what was observed in the period from 2000 to 2015 in all regions (figure 2), it seems unlikely that many African countries will achieve SDG target 3.2 without an unprecedented effort to accelerate the pace of reduction in child mortality.

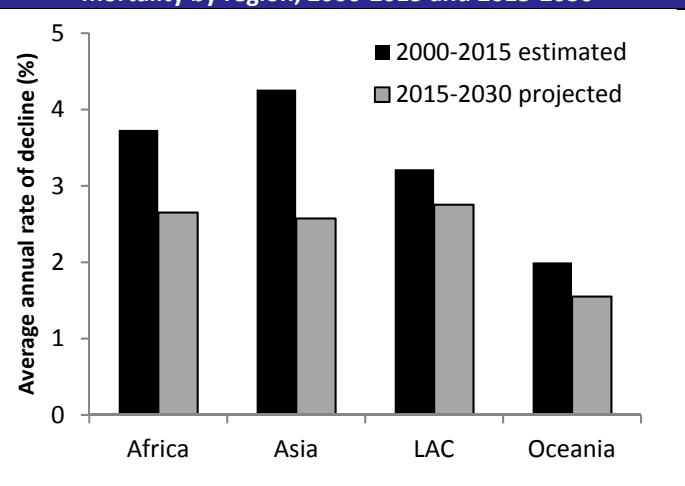
4. In 2015, under-five mortality differed remarkably between subregions of Africa

In 2015, the lowest level of under-five mortality on the continent was observed in Northern Africa (35 per 1,000, hereafter simply 35), followed by Southern Africa (43), Eastern



Data source: United Nations (2017). *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision*

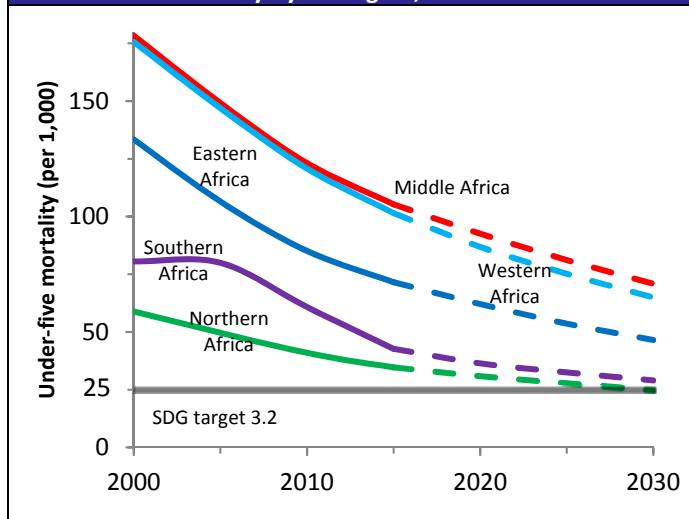
Figure 2. Average annual rate of decline in under-five mortality by region, 2000-2015 and 2015-2030



Data source: United Nations (2017). *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision*

Africa (72) and Western Africa (101), with the highest level found in Middle Africa (105). Except for Northern and possibly Southern Africa, the subregions of Africa seem unlikely to achieve SDG target 3.2 considering the projected trends of the 2017 revision of the *World Population Prospects* (figure 3).

Figure 3. SDG target and African under-five mortality by subregion, 2000-2030



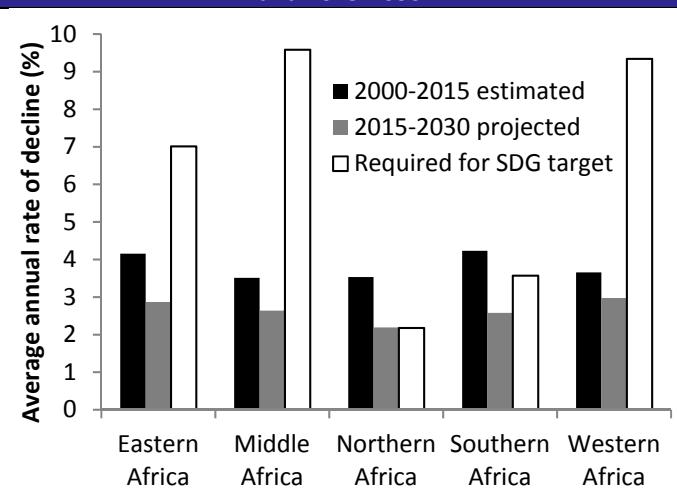
Data source: United Nations (2017). *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision*

Given estimated levels in 2015, whether child mortality in subregions of Africa can plausibly be reduced to no more than the SDG target can also be assessed by an analysis of average rates of decline. Like for Africa as a whole, rates of decline for its subregions between 2015 and 2030 (grey bars in figure 4) are projected to be considerably smaller than what was observed between 2000 and 2015 (black bars in figure 4).

Considering the annual rate of decline required to achieve SDG target 3.2 (white bars in figure 4), Northern Africa is expected to meet the target, while Southern Africa could achieve it by replicating the annual rate of decline from the years between 2000 and 2015. For Eastern, Middle and Western Africa, the

rates required to meet the target are high and without precedent—as much as two and a half times as high as levels observed from 2000 to 2015—and thus unlikely to be achieved without extraordinary efforts.

Figure 4. Average annual rate of decline in under-five mortality for subregions of Africa, 2000-2015 and 2015-2030

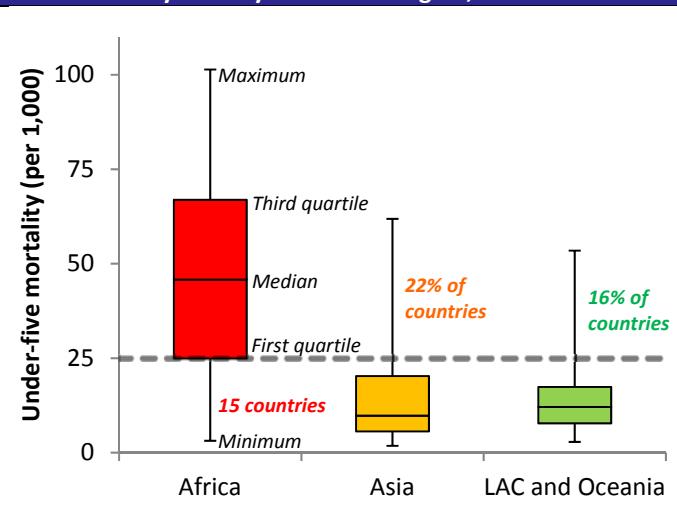


Data source: United Nations (2017). *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision*

5. Achieving SDG target 3.2 for a region as a whole does not ensure that all countries in the region will meet the target, as required by the SDGs

Only in Europe and Northern America are all countries projected to achieve the SDG target. For Latin America and the Caribbean and Oceania combined, the latest UN projections suggest that 16 per cent of countries will not meet the target (figure 5, dashed line). In Asia, 22 per cent of countries are projected not to achieve the target. In Africa, although achieving the target is unlikely for most countries, fifteen (about a quarter of the total number of 57 countries) are projected to meet the target (figure 5).

Figure 5. Under-five mortality distribution by country and within region, 2030



Data source: United Nations (2017). *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision*