

ISSUES NOTE – ECOSOC 2009 OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES SEGMENT

Dialogue with UN country teams “Strengthening UN country team’s coherent support to public health”

Friday, 17 July 2009 10:00 am –12:30 pm, Geneva

I. Purpose of the panel

In recent years, efforts to contain, mitigate and recover from pandemics – combined with long standing health problems such as maternal and child mortality, malaria, tuberculosis and other diseases - have placed increasing demands on developing countries.

The United Nations System has been called upon to strengthen the collective capacity of United Nations country teams in addressing public health issues in support of national priorities and strategies. In this context, there has been a growing need for United Nations organizations to work better together at the country level, and to build partnerships with national and international actors, including outside the government sector, to help countries to progress towards the health-related Internationally Agreed Development Goals (IADGs), including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

This panel will be the occasion to reflect on the support provided by the United Nations system to national authorities in responding to national and global health challenges in the timeliest and most effective manner. The panel will bring together Ministers and representatives of UN country and regional teams from programme countries/regions that have been or are being confronted with a health crisis, such as HIV and AIDS, the Avian influenza and other epidemics, or with persistent health problems such as high maternal and infant mortality and morbidity rates. It will discuss whether the United Nations system has provided timely, well- coordinated, relevant, efficient, effective and sustainable support to programme countries both to implement an immediate response and to strengthen national health systems.

II. Background

A major effort is required for developing countries and Least Developed countries to achieve the health related MDGs, such as child mortality, maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS, nutrition, malaria. This is all the more difficult as the current economic crisis is threatening to impact on public health spending, health seeking behaviours and health outcomes. The crisis however may also open up opportunities for reforming the way health services are financed and organized and for accelerating progress towards universal primary health care¹.

The UN funds, programmes and specialized agencies are actively engaged at the national level in joint efforts to help countries achieve internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), in the health sector. UN organizations operate within the frameworks set by the national policy and various UN joint programming mechanisms such as United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). In some countries, they use collective approaches and instruments such as Sector Wide Approach (SWAP) and Programme-based Approach.

¹ The financial crisis and global health, Report of a high-level consultation, Geneva, Switzerland, 19 January 2009, World Health Organization

Aligning UN system's work behind national priorities is a necessity, as was repeatedly underscored by the UN General Assembly². National health plans have to form the backbone for UN system's support at the country level. This is all the more important that it is estimated that, if one looks at overall aid in the area of health, the scope for countries to make decisions is limited because a substantial proportion of aid is channelled through multi-country projects or technical cooperation. Global and regional priorities have an important influence on aid decisions.

Cooperation and coordination among UN system organizations is also essential to ensure an effective support to governments' needs. This is all the more necessary that health improvements result from changes in a range of related areas such as education, sanitation, transportation, food prices or fiscal policies. In such cooperation, the comparative advantages, core expertise and collective strengths of the various organizations have to be taken into consideration.

There are a number of examples of good cooperation among UN system entities in the area of health. Coordination in the field of HIV/AIDS notably has worked well and contains important lessons for integrating health issues in policy and programme work at country level.

Likewise, UNCTs and lead agencies such as WHO, FAO, the World Bank and others, have been active through all stages of the process that led some 130 countries to develop national avian influenza and pandemic preparedness plans.

As another example, WHO, UNFPA, UNICEF and the World Bank have launched a joint country support for accelerated implementation of maternal and newborn continuum of care.

One characteristic of the health sector is the wealth of development actors it engages, including a range of civil society organizations and global partnerships for health. The building of partnerships with non UN system actors has become a necessity, especially in a context where global challenges continue to grow, most recently with the outbreak of new swine influenza A (H1N1), compounded by continuing major constraints in resources. The United Nations system has to build fully on the advantages offered by partnerships, for instance in terms of scaling up support.

UN inter-agency thematic groups serve as a platform for dialogue, common assessments and analysis, and the development of joint planning to address national priorities. Significant progress was made towards involving non-UN partners in theme groups, including governments, donors, nongovernmental organizations, civil society, and the Bretton Woods institutions. Recently, in some programme countries, there has been a positive trend with UN Theme Groups becoming government theme groups with UN support. This is most evident in response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The panel will discuss the effectiveness and shortcomings of the support provided by the UN system to programme countries in responding to national and global health challenges in various country situations. It will examine UN system's support in Niger - a Least Developed Country with extremely high maternal and infant/child mortality rates - which has made health a priority issue. It will also discuss how the UN system supports national authorities in Pakistan, which is one of the eight pilot countries where the UN is focusing on "Delivering as one", and which has identified health as one of the five thematic areas that the UN support will concentrate on. The panel will also discuss the role of the UN system in Latin America, where, despite

² See General Assembly resolutions on the Triennial Comprehensive Policy Review of UN system's Operational Activities for Development

important regional gains, many health challenges including communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis; various chronic non communicable diseases persist.

The panel is expected to suggest concrete proposals for the UN system to become more effective in helping countries to develop their national health systems and respond to acute health problems or emergencies. Key questions that could be discussed by the panelists include among others:

III. Suggested questions to be addressed in the debate:

The panel will start with presentations by panelists, followed by questions and answers. Panelists are encouraged to limit their presentations within 7 minutes. It is recalled that the focus of the panel is the work of the United Nations system.

1. Is UN system's support in the area of health fully aligned with national priorities? Can the UN system help to increase the alignment of global and national health partnerships with national priorities?
2. How can the UN system work more effectively with key stakeholders in the area of health at the country level (including Civil Society Organizations and partnerships for health)?
3. What kind of coordination actions can be taken by national authorities, UN country team, civil society and private sector to improve health services to achieve health related IADGs/MDGs?
4. What are the key roles of the United Nations in supporting programme countries in moving from the immediate health crisis "resilience" to the well-prepared "resistance" against future health-related crises that might occur?
5. How can the UN system adopt effective and coordinated resource mobilization strategies to achieve health-related MDGs and IADGs?