



28 January 2009

Dear Colleagues and Members,

Thank you for joining the e-discussion on *Global Public Health* that will be launched on MDGNet. The Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are pleased to again have the opportunity to bring a wide array of views to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) through this open, online, multi-stakeholder forum.

This e-discussion is being organized to help prepare for the 2009 Annual Ministerial Review (AMR), to be held during the High-level Segment of ECOSOC in July in Geneva. Established to assess progress in the implementation of the internationally agreed development goals, this year's Review will focus on global public health.

Thanks to concerted efforts by governments, development actors, international organizations and a multitude of other players, the health of the world's population has improved over the last 30 years. In part, this can be traced to better nutrition, water supply, sanitation, housing and education – illustrating the inter-connectedness of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Despite such achievements, progress towards improved health outcomes is too slow and unequal. Gaps are widening, both within and between countries, and can often be traced to underlying social, economic and political causes. There has been a strong call for renewed focus on primary healthcare and for addressing the social determinants of health. Simply stated, health will not improve without improved health systems, *in addition to* more equitable political, economic and social systems.

Health workers are inequitably distributed throughout the world, as well as between rural and urban areas. Fifty-seven countries, most of them in Africa and Asia, face a severe crisis. The number of health workers migrating has significantly increased in the past few decades, in many cases further weakening already fragile health systems. Innovative short-term solutions, along with new levels of international cooperation and investment in training, will be needed to tackle this long-standing challenge.

Considering that social inequalities are exacerbated in time of crisis, the current economic and financial crisis may increase the burden on global public health and impede progress towards the MDGs. This would suggest that now, more than ever, we need to protect social sector spending, particularly on the health sector, both in terms of international assistance and national health budgets.

Another challenge facing developing countries is the mounting rate of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), such as cancer, hypertension, mental health and injuries. The good news is that a significant proportion of deaths by NCDs can be avoided with a comprehensive national strategy on NCDs that reaches beyond the health sector.

These and other health care challenges could be mitigated through partnerships. Non-governmental, private and civil society groups have already made a significant contribution to achieving public health goals. We must further harness and focus the energies of communities, NGOs and the private sector.

In this spirit, all actors have an equal voice in this discussion. Only by sharing bold ideas, challenging one another, and agreeing on coordinated and coherent action can we hope to overcome the obstacles to better health outcomes.

The recommendations and proposals that emerge from this e-discussion will be made widely available on the internet and at the ECOSOC Substantive Session and will help to frame the Secretary-General's report on the Annual Ministerial Review.

We invite you to make full use of this opportunity to share your insights with the Council and with each another.

We thank you in advance for your participation and look forward to a stimulating and productive discussion.

Yours sincerely,

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