Renewing the promise of survival for children

In 2015 the deadline to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will have arrived, and the world will reflect on how it has kept its promises, particularly to its children. A new UNICEF report, *Committing to Child Survival: A Promise Renewed Progress Report 2013,* looks at the advances made so far in fulfilling the promise of survival to all the world’s children. The report, released on Sept 13, provides comprehensive analyses on progress towards MDG 4 with data generated by the UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation. The findings indicate that although there have been substantial gains in reducing global child deaths since 1990, child survival remains an urgent concern and immediate action is needed to redouble efforts to end preventable child deaths.

The recent estimates show that the global rate of mortality in children younger than 5 years has roughly halved since 1990, decreasing from 90 deaths per 1000 livebirths in 1990 to 48 per 1000 livebirths in 2012. The annual number of deaths in children under 5 years has also fallen from 12.6 million to 6.6 million over the same period. Put another way, 17 000 fewer children died each day in 2012 than in 1990 thanks to more effective and affordable treatments, innovative ways of delivering critical interventions to poor and excluded populations, and sustained political commitment. These efforts have resulted in 90 million children surviving their fifth birthday who would otherwise have died if mortality rates prevalent in 1990 had persisted (figure 1).

The global annual rate of reduction in under-5 mortality has steadily accelerated from 1.2% in 1990–95 to 3.9% in 2005–12. Even more encouraging, in sub-Saharan Africa—the region of the world with the highest rates of under-5 mortality—there has been consistent acceleration in reducing child mortality, particularly in eastern and southern Africa (appendix). Other regions of the world continue to see strong gains in child survival. All regions, except west and central Africa, have had falling numbers of under-5 deaths and reduced under-5 mortality rates by at least 50% since 1990. Three other regions—east Asia and Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and central and eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States—have lowered their under-5 mortality rates by 60% or more. South Asia has had the greatest decline in the absolute number of under-5 deaths since 1990: 2.6 million fewer children died in 2012 than in 1990.

Success, however, is a relative measure and must be assessed in the context of both goals and potential. Laudable as these advances are, they are outweighed by the missed opportunities and broken promises to keep millions of children alive. In 2012, 18 000 children died each day from mostly preventable causes. And since 1990, 216 million children have died before their fifth birthday (figure 1)—more than the current total population of Brazil, the world’s fifth most populous nation.

The 2000 Millennium Declaration pledged to reduce the global under-5 mortality rate by two-thirds between 1990 and 2015. This target, which subsequently became MDG 4, will almost certainly be missed unless the global rate of reduction quadruples in 2012–15. Such a pace of reduction is unprecedented. At the regional level, only two regions (east Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean) are currently on track to meet the 2015 deadline for MDG 4. At the country level, if current trends continue, only 63 countries are expected to meet the MDG 4 target by 2015, and 50 countries will meet the target only after 2035.

Millions of young lives hang in the balance unless we can speed up progress on child survival in the coming years.
years. To meet MDG 4 by 2015, an additional 3.5 million children’s lives must be saved from 2013 to 2015 (figure 1).1 If the current pace of progress continues, it will take until 2028 for the world as a whole to reach MDG 4 and cost the lives of an additional 35 million children who would otherwise survive in 2015–28 if we had met our promise on time and continued that trend.

Sub-Saharan Africa faces an urgent challenge in accelerating progress on child survival. It is the region with least progress to date: almost one in every ten children dies before the age of 5 years.1 By mid-century, it is estimated that sub-Saharan Africa will be the region with the largest share of children under 5 years, accounting for 37% of the global under-5 population, and close to 40% of all livebirths.3

Looking at sub-Saharan Africa as a whole does not tell the full story of child survival in that region. There is beginning to be a divergence in child survival trends between eastern and southern Africa and west and central Africa. This has important implications for strategies, priorities, resources, and leadership in the global drive to end preventable child deaths. Eastern and southern Africa has reduced its under-5 mortality rate by 53% since 1990, and in the past 7 years has been among the best performing regions in the world, lowering under-5 mortality at an annual rate of 5.3% in 2005–12. Many of the countries that have recorded the sharpest reductions in under-5 mortality rates are from this region.

By contrast, in west and central Africa there has been a decrease in the under-5 mortality rate of just 39% since 1990—the smallest decline among all regions.1 Moreover, the annual rate of reduction in under-5 mortality in this region, while accelerating, is still the slowest in the world. The region also has the world’s highest rate of under-5 mortality, with almost one in every eight children dying before the age of 5 years. And it is the only region with virtually no reduction in the absolute number of children dying in the past 22 years. In 2012, 30% of global deaths in children younger than 5 years occurred in this region alone.1 A special focus on accelerating progress on child survival in west and central Africa remains an urgent priority for the global child survival community.

Despite progress in fighting childhood diseases, millions of children worldwide die from diseases and conditions of poverty and equity that no longer kill children who live in more affluent settings. Pneumonia, diarrhoea, and malaria are still leading causes of child death.3 Neonatal deaths, which now account for about 44% of all under-5 deaths,1,2 are mostly preventable. Undernutrition is a contributing factor in around 45% of all under-5 deaths.4 Most of the 6.6 million children who died in 2012 could have been saved with effective preventive and curative interventions that target the main causes of death and the most vulnerable mothers, newborn babies, and children.

The good news is that much faster progress is possible. Country experience shows that sharp reductions in preventable child deaths are possible even in low-income countries. Although there is a link between a country’s level of income and its child mortality, the substantial reductions in the under-5 mortality rate in some low-income countries—notably Bangladesh, Cambodia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Liberia, Nepal, Niger, Malawi, Madagascar, Mozambique, Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania—show that low income need not be an impediment to saving children’s lives (figure 2). It is possible to reduce preventable child deaths, even from initially high rates, when concerted action, sound strategies, adequate resources, political will, and committed leadership are consistently applied in support of child and maternal health.

Figure 2: Decline in under-5 mortality rate in 1990–2012 and gross domestic product per capita in 2012 by country
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In the next 2 years, considerable advances in child survival can take place. And that is why A Promise Renewed—a global movement to end preventable child deaths launched in 2012—is focused on accelerating progress towards MDG 4, and setting the foundation for faster advances in reducing child mortality beyond 2015. The international child survival community must seize the opportunity afforded by deliberations on the post-2015 agenda to focus even greater attention on child survival in every country, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and especially in west and central Africa.

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We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.


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