

GENEVA, 22 JANUARY 2008 – Strategies that can help reduce the number of children who die before their fifth birthday were highlighted today, at the launch of UNICEF's flagship report - The State of the World's Children 2008: Child Survival – in Geneva.

While recent data show a fall in the rate of under-five mortality, the State of the World's Children Report 2008 goes beyond the numbers to suggest actions and initiatives that should lead to further progress.

“Community-level integration of essential services for mothers, newborns and young children, and sustainable improvements in national health systems can save the lives of many of the more than 26,000 children under five who die each day,” said Ann M. Veneman, UNICEF Executive Director. “The report describes the impact of simple, affordable life-saving measures, such as exclusive breastfeeding, immunization, insecticide-treated bed nets and vitamin A supplementation, all of which have helped to reduce child deaths in recent years.”

The report's analysis also reveals that far more needs to be done to increase access to treatments and means of prevention, so the devastating impact of pneumonia, diarrhea, malaria, severe acute malnutrition and HIV can be better addressed.

The challenge is to ensure children have access to a continuum of health care, backed by strong national health systems.

"Stepping up investment in health systems will be crucial if we are to meet the child health targets set by the United Nations, but progress can be made even when health systems are weak," said Dr. Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization. "Innovative programs in many countries show that an integrated approach where each child is reached with a package of interventions at one time can bring immediate benefits."

The new information in The State of the World's Children 2008 is drawn from household survey data as well as material from key partners, including the World Health Organization and the World Bank.

It provides examples of successful initiatives, such as the Accelerated Child Survival and Development Initiative, which provides integrated primary care to impoverished households in sub-Saharan Africa, and the Measles Initiative; a global campaign that has helped to reduce measles deaths by around 68 per cent worldwide, and by more than 90 per cent in Africa, since 2000.

The approach to child survival that the report advocates would see the best disease-specific initiatives combined with investment in strong national health systems to create a continuum of care for mothers, newborns and young children that extends from the household, to the local clinic, to the district hospital and beyond.

The report emphasizes the need to involve local communities. These communities generate necessary demand for quality health care and their engagement is vital if marginalized and remote populations are to be reached.

Nowhere is the need for life-saving strategies more apparent than in sub-Saharan Africa where, on average, one child in every six dies before their fifth birthday. In 2006, almost half of all under-five deaths occurred in sub-Saharan Africa, even though less than one quarter of the world's children live there.

The report provides information on a strategic framework developed by UNICEF, WHO, and the World Bank – at the invitation of the African Union – to help African countries and others reduce the toll of maternal and child deaths. The framework calls for:

- Good data to inform policies and programmes;
- A shift to combine disease-specific and nutrition interventions in integrated packages to ensure a continuum of care;
- The mainstreaming of maternal, newborn and child health and nutrition into national strategic planning processes to scale up and strengthen health systems;
- Improved quality and increased, predictable financing for strengthening health systems;
- Political commitments to approaches that provide a continuum of care; and
- The harmonization of global health programmes and partnerships.

“Child survival is not only a human rights imperative, it is also a development imperative,” said Joy Phumaphi, Vice President, - Human Development Network at the World Bank. “Investing in the health of children and their mothers is a sound economic decision and one of the surest ways for a country to set its course towards a better future.”

For more information, visit UNICEF's web site: www.unicef.org