

New York, 7 September 2010 – Addressing the needs of the poorest of the poor is the key to meeting ambitious development goals and reducing global injustice, according to a UNICEF's latest 'Progress for Children' report. The report was released this week, during the first day of a UNICEF Executive Board session at United Nations headquarters in New York.

In 2000, world leaders adopted the UN Millennium Declaration, committing their nations to make the world a more equitable place and setting out a series of time-bound targets that have become known as the Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs. Every year, UNICEF's flagship 'Progress for Children' report monitors progress towards these targets.

This year, 'Progress for Children: Achieving the MDGs with Equity' reveals that, in the push to meet the development goals by their 2015 target date, the very poor are falling further and further behind.

An 'equity-focused' approach

A related UNICEF study, also newly released, shows that the MDGs can be reached faster with investment that focuses on the most disadvantaged.

The study, 'Narrowing the Gaps to Meet the Goals,' finds that helping the world's poorest could save the lives of more mothers and children – and do so in an efficient way.

"This study challenges the thinking that focusing on the poorest and most disadvantaged children is not cost-effective," said UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake. "An equity-focused strategy will yield not only a moral victory, right in principle, but an equally exciting one, right in practice."

Stark inequalities

According to the new 'Progress for Children' report, mortality rates for children under the age of five are, on average, more than twice as high for the poorest 20 per cent of households as for the richest 20 per cent. And the poorest children are twice as likely to be underweight.

Additionally, girls still have the hardest time receiving an education, particularly at the secondary level.

The report finds that while most developing countries are steadily advancing toward the MDGs, many in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are not. The two regions account for more than three-quarters of the 100 million primary school-aged children who are not in school. They also have the highest rates of child marriage, the lowest level of birth registration and the most limited health care coverage.

Reaching the most vulnerable

Adding to the complexity of this picture are pockets of inequality that exist even within countries that are progressing. Children who are orphaned or have disabilities, children from ethnic minorities and those who are exploited and trafficked are most at risk.

Disparities persist between urban and rural populations, as well. Of the 884 million people who lack access to improved drinking water sources worldwide, for example, 84 per cent live in rural areas.

“It is becoming ever clearer that reaching the poorest and more marginalized communities within countries is pivotal to the realization of the goals,” said Mr. Lake.

A more challenging humanitarian environment, climate change, the global financial crisis and rapid urbanization are added factors keeping the very poor out of help’s reach.

“The Millennium Development Goals were designed to improve the lives of the world’s most disadvantaged people,” said Mr. Lake. “We believe this study’s findings can have a real effect on global thinking about the MDGs, and about human development generally, helping us to improve the lives of millions of vulnerable children.”

Source: UNICEF