

PRESS RELEASE

UNICEF conference rings alarm bells on child poverty in South Asia

Regional conference on child well-being and equity opens today in Dhaka

Dhaka, Bangladesh 1 November 2009 – New data presented by UNICEF here today shows that 300 million children are trapped in poverty in South Asia -almost half of all children in South Asia.

At the opening of a conference in Dhaka on Achieving Child Wellbeing and Equity in South Asia, UNICEF urged leaders of the region to seek new ways of addressing child poverty by addressing deprivation of children's seven basic needs: food, education, health, information, shelter, water and sanitation.

"We now have a better understanding of the real depth of how poverty affects children – not just as a side effect of their parents' income but their own profound deprivation," said UNICEF Regional Director for South Asia, Daniel Toole. *"Unlike any other region in the world, due to persistent and deep inequalities in the region, children in South Asia become trapped in an unrelenting cycle of discrimination at several levels -- poor nutrition, health and sanitation and being excluded from education. This puts a child's face to chronic poverty so we can now design more strategic policies."*

The conference was opened by the Minister of Planning, Government of Bangladesh, A.K. Khandaker. Other delegates at the conference were the Minister for Women and Child Affairs, Shirin Sharmin Chaudhary, Vice Chair of the Planning Commission of Nepal, Dr Yubaraj Khatiwada, Deputy Minister of Health and Family from the Maldives, Mariya Ali, Director Information of poverty alleviation, SAARC, Niranjana Basnyat, as well as government officials, academics, and other groups working to eliminate child poverty from the region, representatives from UNICEF and other UN agencies and NGO partners from across South Asia. The conference closes on Tuesday 3 November.

UNICEF is proposing that a shift in the definition of poverty needs to take place - away from a narrow measurement that addresses income exclusively to a definition that includes income poverty, deprivation and well-being. This approach can result in comprehensive policy responses that target a more holistic approach to achieving children's well-being.

During this conference on 'Achieving Child Wellbeing and Equity in South Asia', Governments, UNICEF and civil society examined ways of using this new approach to pinpoint efforts to tackle child poverty. Over the past decade, child poverty rates in South Asia have stagnated or even worsened in some areas, raising grave concerns about children's well-being. *"Investing in children is both a fundamental*

responsibility and an opportunity that, if not grabbed now, will tarnish a nation's growth," says UNICEF Regional Director for South Asia Daniel Toole. "This is a responsibility because poverty and under-nutrition damages a child's chance to thrive and also hampers the potential of countries to develop. More than other interventions, investing resources into good nutrition, primary health care, education and protection for children will provide rich rewards in future."

Key interventions that require investment include scaling-up national programmes on nutrition and associated health interventions, including community-based management of acute malnutrition, newborn and maternal health initiatives and support to basic health services through childhood, youth and early adulthood for women, as well as improving access to water, sanitation and hygiene and education.

About UNICEF

UNICEF is on the ground in over 150 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments.

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