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UNICEF challenges top child health experts to find practical solutions to accelerating child survival and development in South Africa

Johannesburg, 04 December, 2008...UNICEF today challenged South African health experts to continue to work to find practical solutions with a human rights approach that will give the country a better chance of achieving child health and survival goals while addressing the development disparities in the country.

“It is hard to believe that South Africa is one of the 14 countries in Africa where child mortality has been stagnant, if not increasing, over the last 15 years. Yet, South Africa has the highest per capita expenditure on health, the highest technical expertise and the best health infrastructure in Sub-Saharan Africa. Can this forum of experts tell us where we have we collectively gone wrong?” UNICEF Country Representative Aida Girma said.

Ms. Girma who addressed more than 120 participants drawn from national and provincial government, academia and child rights’ organisations at the 2nd Child Health Priorities Conference, observed that although significant gains had been made, there were numerous challenges yet to be met in building strategic and sustainable national partnerships to accelerate child survival and development in the country.

A year ago at the inaugural Child Health Priorities Conference (CHPC) held in Durban, the children’s organization appealed to the National Department of Health to develop a unified child and maternal survival strategy encompassing maternal, neonatal, child, women’s health and nutrition that would serve as a framework for accelerating child survival and development interventions. That meeting, sponsored by UNICEF and attended by over 140 participants, was characterised by a series of stimulating and thought-provoking plenary, round table, and research presentation sessions.

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Similar thought provoking outputs are expected this year from the two-day conference from 4–5 December which takes place at the University of the Witwatersrand Medical School in Johannesburg

UNICEF says the conference offers an excellent platform to keep the momentum of child health and child survival, share knowledge on issues such as paediatric AIDS and nutrition and to examine whether gaps are being closed and quality health standards are being met. Delegates will also deliberate on how to make space to keep track of progress towards the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's), particularly MDG4, 5, and 6, which focus on maternal and child mortality, from an evidence-based perspective.

In her opening statement, Ms. Girma called attention to the need for improvements in the quality of child health programmes and services in the country, noting that 91% of babies are born in hospitals and maternity units. Yet, whilst more than 40% of maternity hospitals are certified baby friendly (BFHI), rates of exclusive breastfeeding remain among the lowest on the continent (10% at 0-3 months and 8% at 4-6 months).

Low returns on South Africa's high investment in health care

She also tackled the question of low returns on South Africa's high investment in health care and stressed the need to provide adequate human resources and to reverse the upward trend in death rates amongst South African women and children while in expert care, despite the higher levels of knowledge amongst today's health professionals.

"Over the last many years, women and children have come in large numbers to seek medical services in hospitals and clinics as evidenced by the high utilization of maternal and child health services in South Africa: 92% antenatal care coverage, 91% deliveries by doctors and nurses, 99% DPT1 coverage at 6 weeks and 84% measles immunization

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coverage at 9 months. Today, we have more knowledge and better solutions than there were 10 years. So why are South African women and children still dying in higher numbers and proportions than they did years ago?”

Like the 1st Child Health Priorities conference, this meeting will focus on presenting new research and current evidence that informs child health practice in South Africa. The programme includes plenary and abstract driven sessions on: Achieving the Millennium Development Goals in South Africa: a review of the implementation of some key strategies to reduce poverty, hunger and child mortality; PMTCT, HAART and the health system; Preventing and managing child malnutrition; Advances and new developments in child health programme delivery (including immunisation, IMCI, the new Road to Health card); Human resources for child health; Improving the quality of child health care; Developing local capacity to support child health; Community interventions for child health ;The Children’s Act and new child care legislation.

UNICEF has pledged its continuing support to the evidence-based issues raised by the gathering and is actively promoting the development of consensus on unified child health and mortality data to support reporting on progress made towards the MDG’s.

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