The numbers

Far fewer children are dying today than in 1960, the earliest year for which the annual number of child deaths is currently available. In fact, over the past 46 years, the annual number of child deaths has halved, from roughly 20 million in 1960 to under 10 million in 2006. Recent years have seen important and, in some cases, remarkable advances in child survival. Despite considerable impediments, most notably the onslaught of AIDS in Eastern and Southern Africa and internecine conflict in many high-mortality countries, the global child mortality rate has been steadily reduced since 1990. In 2006, it was estimated at 72 deaths per 1,000 live births, 23 percent lower than the 1990 level.

In a number of regions, the rate of reduction in child mortality since 1990 has been striking. Child mortality rates have been roughly halved in East Asia and the Pacific, Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS), and Latin America and the Caribbean – bringing the under-five mortality rate for each of these regions below 30 per 1,000 live births in 2006. Although much more progress would be needed to match the low average rate of industrialized countries (6 per 1,000 live births in 2006), only about 1 in every 36 children born in these three regions now dies before the age of five.

Other regions are following behind. The Middle East and North Africa region has seen steady progress in reducing rates but still had an under-five mortality rate of 46 per 1,000 live births in 2006 – equivalent to 1 in every 22 children dying before age five. South Asia is also making headway, although among the regions it has the second highest number of deaths among children under five, accounting for 32 per cent of the global total. In 1990, 1 in every 8 South Asian children died before age five; by 2006, the ratio had decreased to 1 in 12.

Sub-Saharan Africa remains the most troubling geographic area. In addition to having by far the highest rate of child mortality – on average, 1 in every 6 children dies before age five – the region as a whole has shown the least progress since 1990, managing to reduce the burden of child mortality by only 14 per cent between 1990 and 2006. A number of countries in the region are still registering increases in under-five mortality rates. In 2006, 49 per cent of all deaths of children under age five occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa, despite the fact that only 22 per cent of the world’s children are born there.

Child survival and the Millennium Development Goals

Half of the world’s regions are making insufficient progress towards MDG 4

Although overall gains in child survival have been impressive, they have not been nearly sufficient in several regions to achieve MDG 4. Four regions are on track to meet the goal, but progress in reducing child mortality in the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (both Eastern and Southern Africa and the West and Central subregions) is currently insufficient.

On a country-by-country basis, the prospects are mixed. Globally, of the 191 countries with adequate data for the 1990–2006 comparison in child mortality, UNICEF estimates that 129 are on track – having reduced the under-five mortality rate to below 40 per 1,000 live births or achieved an average annual reduction rate of 3.9 per cent or more since 1990 – or they have already met the 2015 goal for reducing child mortality. Around 18 per cent, or 35 countries, are making progress but at a rate that