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WHO Urges Massive Investment in Health Programs

By Lisa Schlein
Geneva

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Leading health and science experts say improving health is essential for reducing poverty around the world. Health experts say the world must immediately increase funding in health programs in order to achieve U.N. targets set five-years ago.

At a summit on the millennium in 2000, the United Nations established a goal of cutting global poverty in half by the year 2015. The director-general of the World Health Organization, Lee Jong-wook, says health is at the heart of the U.N. Millennium Development Project to reduce poverty.

"In many situations, improved health is impossible without poverty reduction just as health is indispensable for the fight against poverty," he said.

The United Nations estimates more than one billion people in the world live on less than \$1 a day and nearly three billion more struggle to survive on less than \$2 a day. The World Health Organization (WHO) says poverty leads to ill health and this results in more than 11 million child deaths a year, six million of them from preventable diseases.

Health experts say Africa is the continent that suffers most from poverty and disease.

For example, WHO finds more than 50 percent of Africans suffer from water-related diseases such as cholera and infant diarrhea. It says more than one million children in Africa die of malaria every year; more people in Africa are infected with HIV and die of AIDS-related causes than anywhere else in the world.

The Millennium Project set up five groups to tackle problems of HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, access to essential medicines and child and maternal health.

U.N. project health advisor Margaret Kruk says all the groups agree that health systems in the poor countries must be strengthened, that official development aid should be increased, and special attention be given to female health and AIDS prevention.

"It wants to infuse prevention with the same urgency now that we are now seeing in the treatment efforts," she said. "In countries with concentrated epidemics, the group recommends focusing prevention and treatment efforts on vulnerable groups. In particular enhancing their human rights and their status in society as a way of preventing spread, but also of recognizing the stand-alone human rights of those groups."

In addition to strengthening the AIDS-prevention campaign, Millennium Project advisers are also calling for wider distribution of insecticide-treated nets and malaria drugs to people living in malaria infested communities. They are also seeking more intensive TB care, as well as greater health services for expectant mothers and skilled attendants at delivery to reduce child and maternal deaths.

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The Millennium Project says meeting the goal of cutting poverty in half by 2015 will not be cheap. It estimates it will cost 135-billion dollars in 2006, increasing to \$195 billion by 2015.

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