

SIGNS OF PROGRESS AND MOMENTUM IN GLOBAL RESPONSE TO CHILDREN AND AIDS

A report from UNICEF's Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS campaign

TORONTO, 16 January, 2007 – In *Children and AIDS: A Stocktaking*, released today, UNICEF reports that there are positive signs of progress and momentum in the global response to children and AIDS and indicates that some countries have achieved breakthroughs, particularly in preventing HIV transmission from mothers to children and in providing treatment for children living with HIV/AIDS. While the report demonstrates positive momentum, it also underlines the great degree to which the children in the path of the AIDS pandemic continue to be vulnerable to illness, death, poverty and loss of opportunity

“This report confirms that a growing focus on children and young people affected by HIV/AIDS can bear results, proving that, with decisive actions, we could make this the last generation of children to bear the brunt of AIDS,” says Nigel Fisher, UNICEF Canada President & CEO. “But we need to capitalize on the indications of progress that we see in this report and ensure much greater momentum if we truly aim to achieve this. The problem is not due to a lack of knowledge: we know what to do. The real issues are the will to act and the resource commitment to make action happen.”

The report finds that by the end of 2006, children and AIDS had become more clearly integrated into national policy frameworks, including national plans of action and poverty reduction strategies in at least 20 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Increasing numbers of children are now receiving ARV treatment as a result of improved testing, lower drug prices and simpler formulations. In several countries, behaviour change has translated into declining HIV prevalence among young people. The disparity between orphans and non-orphans in access to education is also being reduced in several countries.

Paediatric Treatment

Paediatric treatment appears to show the greatest gains and momentum, in part because of the dramatic decrease in the cost of ARV drugs, yet only 10 per cent of the 780,000 children estimated to be in need of ART actually receive it. For the remaining 9 out of 10, one-third will die by the age of one and 50 per cent will die by their second birthday. Only four per cent of children born to HIV-infected mothers receive treatment to prevent opportunistic infections that can be fatal to children with HIV. In 2006 alone, an estimated 380,000 children died of AIDS-related illness. But several countries – including Botswana, India, Rwanda, South Africa and Thailand – have been able to scale up HIV treatment of children by integrating it into treatment sites for adults. Since 2004, UNICEF has increased its supply of antiretrovirals to nearly 40 countries by 84 per cent.

Preventing Mother-to-Child Transmission

Overall access to ARV treatment by pregnant women with HIV/AIDS in low- and middle-income countries increased from three per cent in 2003 to nine percent in 2005 – a positive but far too modest increase. Targets for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, providing appropriate services to 80 per cent of women in need, are being met in four countries where services are mainstreamed into

existing maternal and child health programmes: Ukraine, Argentina, Jamaica and the Russian Federation. But very few countries are on course to meet the 80 per cent target and an estimated 530,000 children were newly infected with HIV in 2006, mainly through mother-to-child transmission. UNICEF is working with Ministries of Health to continue the scaling up of PMTCT programmes, including funding counselling and health services for pregnant women and new mothers, antiretroviral therapy for the mother and infant and counselling on infant feeding method.

Preventing New Infections

The stocktaking report notes that prevention efforts have intensified in some countries with renewed attention on the need to focus strategies on adolescents and young people most at risk. In more than 70 countries surveyed, testing and use of counselling services increased from roughly four million people in 2001 to 16.5 million in 2005. New evidence suggests that declining HIV prevalence in Kenya, urban areas of Cote d'Ivoire, Malawi and Zimbabwe, and in rural areas of Botswana, has resulted from the adoption of safer sexual behaviour by young people. UNICEF has invested extensively in multi-media programming to raise awareness of HIV and AIDS prevention; in countries such as Namibia, Zambia and Mozambique, community volunteers create and produce radio dramas on the subjects of HIV and AIDS, stigma and prevention. With fewer than 1 in 3 young people in sub-Saharan Africa having the comprehensive knowledge about AIDS that will help protect them against the virus, a much greater implementation of strategies focusing on young people is necessary.

Supporting Orphaned and Vulnerable Children

The disparity between orphans and non-orphans in access to education is being significantly reduced in several countries, partly due to the abolition of school fees in those countries, according to the report. UNICEF action to support children orphaned and made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS includes providing material support to orphaned children, support to elderly caregivers and working with community-based social programmes for the mental well-being of children. It also promotes the strengthening of legislation regarding poverty-reduction, wills, inheritance and birth registration. In sub-Saharan Africa in 2006, between 3.3 million and 5 million orphans and vulnerable children were receiving services in the form of education, health care, food, economic or psychosocial support.

The report seeks to identify discernible trends through the measurement of new and existing data against a baseline used here for the first time. Collecting and disaggregating data by age group and gender is one of the most vital, simple and effective ways of putting children on the AIDS agenda. By improving data collection efforts and analysis, UNICEF and governments can better measure progress and identify gaps.

Just over a year ago, UNICEF launched its Unite for Children, Unite against AIDS campaign both to draw attention to the scale on which AIDS has redefined childhood for millions of children and to mobilize increased global support for HIV/AIDS programmes that serve children. Donations to UNICEF Canada's Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS campaign can be made on-line at www.unicef.ca, by phone at 1-800-567-4483, or by cheque payable to UNICEF Canada – HIV/AIDS and mailed to UNICEF Canada, 2200 Yonge St., Suite 1100, Toronto, ON, M4S 2C6.

UNICEF is the world's leader for children, working in 156 countries and territories to save, protect and enhance the lives of girls and boys. UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, promotes quality basic education, protects children from violence, exploitation and AIDS, and is the world's largest provider of vaccines for developing nations. A global leader in emergencies with six decades of on-the-ground experience, UNICEF saves and rebuilds children's lives in natural disasters and conflict. UNICEF is funded entirely by voluntary contributions from individuals, businesses, foundations, schools, associations and governments.