

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) unless clear and immediate action is taken combined with a concerted effort over the next 12 years, warned the World Bank and WHO in Geneva at a meeting on 8 and 9 January.

The meeting brought together representatives from concerned countries, development agencies and UN organizations to assess progress towards the health-related goals and to map out a future strategy for their achievement. The World Bank and WHO noted that the health goals are particularly difficult to meet and that progress towards them is slower than towards some of the other goals. Four of the eight MDGs, set at the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000, relate to health: to reduce maternal mortality by three-quarters and child mortality by two-thirds, halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, and improve access to safe drinking-water and essential drugs.

“When these kinds of targets are set, it seems too soon to take urgent action, and then, after a few short years, it seems too late,” said Dr LEE Jong-wook, WHO Director-General. “Where the targets are the product of a large consensus there is also the hazard of everyone waiting for everyone else to risk making the first move. We still have time to avoid these

Health-related Millennium Development Goals out of reach for many countries

Many developing countries will not be able to reach the health-related

pitfalls with the targets for 2015, but to do so we have to act now.”

The World Bank estimates that progress against child mortality has so far been so slow that no sub-Saharan country in Africa is on target to reach this goal. Currently only 16% of developing countries are on track for achieving the child mortality target. The maternal mortality goal is faring little better: only 17% of developing countries are likely to meet this target. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, just 4.2% of countries are on track for reducing maternal mortality to levels set by the MDGs for 2015. In addition, 60% of developing countries will fail to adequately reduce malnutrition.

“We need to look at measures such as committing increased resources to meeting the health-related MDGs, and using those resources more effectively in countries,” said Mr James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank. “Donor harmonization in resource mobilization and use, strengthening human resources in the health sector and improving monitoring and evaluation, through the optic of a strong country and equity focus, will be particularly important,” he added.

Lack of progress towards the health-related MDGs is likely to affect progress towards the other goals, such as those concerned with education. Furthermore, both education and access to clean water for mothers are key determinants of child mortality rates.

Participants at the meeting noted that although lack of resources has been identified as a huge constraint, many of the “technologies” needed to improve health are available and affordable. The absence of strong health systems was highlighted as one of the major obstacles to getting these technologies to people in developing countries. ■