Every year over 3.5 million children under five years of age in sub-Saharan Africa die of preventable and treatable diseases including infections, malnutrition and neonatal conditions. Only seven countries in the WHO African Region are on track to achieve Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 4 which is to reduce child deaths by two-thirds from the 1990 level by 2015. More than half of maternal deaths worldwide occur in the African Region. Newborn mortality is the highest in the world, estimated at 45 deaths per 1000 live births. Very few countries are showing adequate progress towards the MDG target on reducing maternal mortality.

Africa is the continent most affected by malaria, accounting for 86% of the estimated 247 million malaria episodes and 91% of malaria deaths worldwide in 2006. Cancer of the cervix is the commonest cancer and the leading cause of cancer mortality among women in the African Region. These are some of the issues that are the focus of this issue of the African Health Monitor.

In 2000, world leaders adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals, setting the year 2015 as the date for reaching the targets. The MDGs constituted an unprecedented commitment by world leaders to comprehensively address peace, security, development, human rights and fundamental freedoms. The available evidence indicates that most of the countries in the African Region have not made sufficient progress towards the MDG targets. Supporting countries improve performance and progress towards the health-
related MDGs is an important priority of the WHO in the African Region as stated in the Strategic Directions (2010–2015).

Putting the health of mothers and children first is one of the six strategic directions. WHO is intensifying advocacy to have women’s health issues placed high on the political agenda of Member States and regional institutions. WHO is also providing enhanced support to countries to accelerate the implementation of the Child Survival Strategy for the African Region and other relevant Regional Committee resolutions. Support is also being provided to scale up essential services, namely, newborn care; infant and young child feeding; provision of nutrition services including micronutrient supplementation; immunization of mothers and children; prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV and malaria using insecticide-treated nets (ITNs) and intermittent preventive treatment; de-worming; and integrated management of childhood illness including care of children exposed to or infected with HIV.

Accelerated actions on HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis constitute another priority area included in the strategic directions. WHO will advocate strong country ownership and leadership for accelerated, evidence based and comprehensive scaling up of agreed cost-effective interventions for the prevention and control of HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. The fifth strategic direction envisages intensifying the prevention and control of communicable and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). WHO is advocating high-level political commitment of governments and engagement with partners in mobilizing the resources required for disease elimination and eradication programmes including polio eradication. Support is being provided for a large-scale assessment of the burden and trends of priority noncommunicable diseases including cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes, sickle-cell anaemia, mental disorders, injuries and disabilities, and to identify risk factors and major determinants through the Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response (IDSR) and the WHO Stepwise approach to surveillance of risk factors (STEPS) surveys. The evidence gathered will form the basis for the elaboration of the African Health report on NCDs.

In 2000, world leaders adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals, setting the year 2015 as the date for reaching the targets.

Two papers deal with cancer: the first looking at the role of information, education and communication on prevention, while the second describes Guinea’s experience of a specific cancer.

All the articles in this issue of the Monitor deal with important issues in the African Region and thus would be useful reading to all health workers and policymakers.

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