Editorial

Health inequities and key determinants of health in the African Region

The strategic directions of WHO-AFRO (2010–2015) are based on the recognition of the impact of key health determinants such as economic, social and environmental factors on health development and outcomes, as well as more proximal determinants such as behavioural risk factors. It underscores the need to address health determinants in the African Region where health inequalities are prominent and access to quality health services is limited.

A number of steps have been taken by AFRO for tackling health inequities through action on the determinants of health: a regional strategy was put in place and countries are being supported to develop health policies and strategies that enhance equity, are responsive to gender, and based on human rights. AFRO also provides normative and technical guidance to countries for strengthening food safety and nutrition programmes, including early warning systems, and nutrition and foodborne disease surveillance in line with the Regional Strategy on Food Safety and Health and the African Regional Nutritional Strategy 2005–2015.

This issue of the Monitor focuses on key determinants of health in the African Region and contains a number of papers describing the various facets of WHO’s work on these determinants.

The first article, “A strategy for addressing the key determinants of health in the African Region”, as reviewed and endorsed by the Regional Committee in 2010, proposes closing health gaps through priority interventions in line with the three overarching recommendations of the WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health: improving daily living conditions; tackling inequitable distribution of power, money and resources; and measuring and understanding the problem and assessing the impact of action.

Health promotion, discussed in a progress report on the implementation of the Regional Health Promotion Strategy (2001), is a cost-effective approach and a socially justifiable investment that can significantly help improve the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities.

Climate change has a direct effect on public health, but the majority of countries in the African Region are ill prepared to cope with its health impact, as discussed in an article on health considerations within national adaptation programmes of action for climate change in least developed countries and small island states.

Among infectious diseases, HIV/AIDS continues to be a strong risk factor in the Region, particularly among women. A report on progress in preventing mother-child transmission of HIV/AIDS in the last decade is included in this issue. Additionally, the issues and challenges of antimicrobial resistance in the African Region are discussed.

Recent decades have seen significant increases in noncommunicable diseases (NCD) in the Region, in addition to the long-standing burden of infectious disease. Alcohol abuse, together with drug abuse and tobacco use, is high on the list of critical health risk factors in the Region. An article discusses a strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol in the African Region.

This issue of the Monitor concludes with a look at the challenges facing the introduction of the WHO surgical safety checklist in African countries, the quarterly “Communicable Disease and Epidemiological Report” and a section on news and events.

I trust that staff of WHO and health workers throughout the Region will find it useful.

Luis Gomes Sambo, Regional Director