

Child deaths halved since 1990, but UN goal missed

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Image: Wikimedia Commons

The number of deaths among children under five has halved globally since 1990—well short of the UN goal of slashing infant mortality by two-thirds in 25 years, said data released Wednesday.

Only 62 of 195 countries met targets they adopted 15 years ago, said a study which measured the world's performance in one of the eight so-called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for a healthier, more prosperous world.

The mortality rate among children younger than five fell globally from 91 deaths per 1,000 [live births](#) in 1990, to 43 per 1,000 in 2015, said the review published in *The Lancet* medical journal.

Translated into hard numbers, the death toll of newborns, infants and small children— mainly from preventable causes—shrank from 12.7 million in 1990 to an estimated 5.9 million this year.

The MDGs were set in 2000 and expire this year, but the period covered by the [child mortality](#) target reached back to 1990.

There were a staggering quarter-of-a-billion deaths overall, and the MDG on child mortality was missed by a "wide margin", according to a UN statement.

"We have to acknowledge tremendous global progress," said Geeta Rao Gupta, deputy executive director of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), which participated in the research.

"But the far too large number of children still dying from preventable causes before their fifth birthday... should impel us to redouble our efforts to do what we know needs to be done."

The study, led by Danzhen You of UNICEF, was the first to include estimates for 2015.

It also made projections for child mortality in the coming 15 years—the period covered by Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) set to be approved by a UN General Assembly later this month to succeed the MDGs.

The new target is 25 or fewer under-five deaths per 1,000 live births by 2030.

"The unfinished business of [child survival](#) looms large," wrote the study authors. "Every child's death represents the loss of a unique human being."

Nearly half of infant deaths are associated with malnutrition, and 45 percent occur during the first 28 days of life.

Leading causes are labour complications or premature birth, pneumonia, diarrhoea, sepsis, and malaria.

West and Central Africa, the world's poorest regions, still have the world's highest under-five death rates, the researchers found.

Faster decline

In Sub-Saharan Africa today, one child in a dozen dies during the first four years of life, more than 12 times the average in high-income countries.

But two areas—East Asia and the Pacific, along with Latin America and the Caribbean—did meet the MDG targets, and 62 nations including Ethiopia, Eritrea, Bangladesh, Georgia, El Salvador, Bolivia, Egypt, Cambodia, Nepal and Yemen.

Encouragingly, for 102 countries, the data suggested a faster decline in mortality over 2000-2015 compared to 1990-2000. This acceleration from 2000, when the MDGs were introduced, resulted in about 18 million fewer under-five deaths globally, the study said.

If the mortality rate remains constant, 94 million children will die before their fifth birthday in the coming 15 years, said the study. But if the 2000-2015 curve keeps accelerating, the number will drop to 69 million, and if the new SDG target is met, 56 million.

In order to achieve the new goals, 47 countries must speed up progress, 34 of them in sub-Saharan Africa, and two—Afghanistan and Pakistan—in South Asia, said the study.

"Without intensified efforts to reduce child mortality, particularly in the highest mortality areas and in contexts with persistent inequities, the post-2015 SDG target will be unattainable," the authors concluded.

"Child survival must remain at the heart of the SDG agenda."

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