

South Africa's child mortality reduction deemed 'a successful failure'

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Peter Byass, professor in Public Health at Umea University Credit: Mattias Pettersson

As the 25-year period for the UN Millennium Development Goals concludes on Dec. 31. 2015, to be replaced by the Sustainable

Development Goals, a deeper analysis of factors outside defined goals is necessary to learn why some countries failed. This is an argument presented by researchers at Umeå University in an article published today in the scientific journal *PLOS Medicine*.

The case of South Africa, which failed to meet the MDG4 child mortality goal due to the simultaneous onset of the HIV epidemic, suggests that success is partly determined by how the goal was formulated. In South Africa, under-five mortality was already low in 1990, but increased as the HIV epidemic emerged. Thus, despite considerable mortality reduction in the last 10 years, South Africa saw no appreciable change between 2015 and the beginning of the MDG period (see graph).

"Whether or not a country achieved MDG4 also depends on how narrowly that goal was defined," says Peter Byass, epidemiologist at Umeå University and lead author of the article. "Our statistical research shows that it is possible to be successful in terms of controlling the HIV epidemic and lowering child mortality, as has been the case in South Africa, but at the same time spectacularly failing to meet MDG4. Although South Africa was never likely to meet the arbitrarily defined goal of reducing under-five child mortality by two thirds, the country is nevertheless back to the child mortality level it had before the HIV epidemic, which objectively should be considered a huge success."

Drawing conclusions from national child mortality data is difficult because it requires access to detailed, consistent and reliable data for the entire MDG period from 1990-2015. However, a unique set of health data from the population of the Agincourt sub-district, in northeastern South Africa, offers a rare exhaustive glimpse of a population through the MDG period. The data is based on annual household visits, which included verbal autopsies to determine the number and causes of deaths in each household.

"Even though South Africa in the last 10 years has successfully reduced the number of childhood deaths associated with HIV, bringing overall child mortality levels down, the country's progress as measured against MDG4 is deemed a failure. As MDG outcomes are now evaluated and successful cases highlighted, we can learn from these findings. Countries such as South Africa, that failed to meet MDG4 as it was defined, should be evaluated more deeply and in ways that factor in disruptive factors such as HIV," says Peter Byass.

In the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which will supersede the MDGs from Jan. 1, 2016, the new [child mortality](#) goal is based on absolute numbers instead of a percentage reduction from the baseline rate. The new goal calls for less than 25 deaths per 1,000 live births by 2030 in all countries.

More information: The findings are described in an article titled 'A successful failure: Missing the MDG4 target for under-five mortality in South Africa', published today in the journal *PLOS Medicine*.

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Provided by Umea University

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