



The health gap between poor and rich countries has narrowed significantly over the past two decades according to a United Nations report released yesterday, which stresses that in spite of this progress, challenges still remain to achieve the health targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

"Intensive efforts to achieve the MDGs have clearly improved health for people all over the world," said the Director-General of the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), Margaret Chan, but with less than 1000 days to go to reach the deadline for achieving the Goals, "it is timely to ask if these efforts have made a difference in reducing the unacceptable inequities between the richest and poorest countries."

Agreed by world leaders at a UN summit in 2000, the eight MDGs set specific targets on poverty alleviation, education, gender equality, child and maternal health, environmental stability, HIV/AIDS reduction, and the creation of a Global Partnership for Development – all by a deadline of 2015.

WHO's [World Health Statistics 2013](#) report, which compares progress made by countries with the best health status and those with least-favourable health status over the past two decades, shows that considerable progress has been made in the areas of reducing child and maternal deaths, improving nutrition, and reducing deaths and illness from HIV infections, tuberculosis and malaria.

The gap in child mortality fell, from 171 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 107 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2011. Countries that had some of the world's highest child mortality rates in 1990 – including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Laos, Madagascar, Nepal, Rwanda, Senegal and Timor-Leste – have improved child survival to such an extent that they no longer belong to that group.

However, despite 27 countries having already reached the MDG target, the current rates of progress will not be sufficient to reach the global target of a two-thirds reduction in 1990 levels of child mortality by 2015, the report says.

Global statistics on the number of women dying in childbirth also improved, but WHO warned that the global decline rate in maternal deaths – currently at 3 per cent – needs to double to meet the goal of reducing maternal deaths by three-quarters.

"Our statistics show that overall the gaps are closing between the most-advantaged and least-advantaged countries of the world," said Ties Boerma, Director of the Department of Health Statistics and Information Systems at WHO. "However, the situation is far from satisfactory as progress is uneven and large gaps persist between and within countries."

The report noted several key areas to focus on before the MDG deadline including reducing tuberculosis in the countries with the highest rates, addressing increasing rates of diabetes, and ensuring low and middle-income countries have access to affordable medicines.

The report contains data from 194 countries on a range of mortality, disease and health system indicators including life expectancy, illnesses and deaths from key diseases, health services and treatments, financial investment in health, as well as risk factors and behaviours that affect health.

Source: [UN News Centre](#)