The EU’s strategy on health

The health of most of those in the developing world is much worse than it could or should be. More than 10 million people still die each year from readily preventable or treatable conditions, such as measles, respiratory infections, malaria and malnutrition. The poorest suffer most from ill health and the effect of expensive care.

Improving health amongst the poor is a critical element in any strategy to eradicate poverty. It is also important for sustainable development and economic growth in developing countries. Without significant improvements, there is no possibility of realising the ambitious Millennium Development Goals directly related to health:

- cutting the death rates for infants and children under the age of five in developing countries by two-thirds;
- reducing the number of mothers dying during childbirth by three-quarters;
- offering universal access to reproductive health care; and
- reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other major diseases.

Too many young mothers – and children – die in a world in which modern medicine has reached an unprecedented degree of sophistication, allowing people in industrialised countries to live longer and fuller lives. Diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria pose serious threats to health across the world. While HIV/AIDS brings immense pain and sorrow to rich and poor alike, the epidemic scale of illness in developing countries is disintegrating the fabric of whole societies. Without enough teachers to sustain education, workers to promote industry, or doctors to care for the sick, nations cannot develop sustainable and prosperous economies. It has been estimated that approximately 8 million lives could be saved by 2010 – mainly in low-income countries – through key interventions against infectious diseases and nutritional deficiencies.

Health at Johannesburg

Health will be an important issue for the Political Declaration and the Plan of Implementation to be agreed amongst governments at the Summit. The EU is not planning to launch a specific ‘type 2’ partnership initiative on health there. This is because there are already many important global health initiatives underway and the focus should be now on implementation.

What is the European Union’s response?

The EU is committed to the Millennium Development Goals for Health. These Goals, set in 2000 at the United Nations General Assembly.

To work towards the Millennium Goals, the Union is increasing development assistance for health over the next five years and is encouraging the international community to do likewise. One of the main channels through which support will be delivered is the EU’s Country Strategy Papers. These strategies are developed by the European Commission in coordination with the World Bank. Money alone, however, will not solve problems. For investment to be effective, developing countries must create policies and national budgetary frameworks that deliver better health for everyone. The international community also needs to play its part in facilitating improved world health and monitoring.

Maternal and child health

Women are disproportionately represented amongst the poor. The positive relationship between women’s education, participation in employment, income levels and child rearing activities is well established. Universal access to core social services, such as social protection and primary health care, are fundamental to breaking the vicious cycle of poverty.

A main EU objective is to improve maternal health and to reduce the tragic levels of maternal mortality. A first target is to reduce the rate of death among mothers by three-quarters. Particular attention is placed on ensuring that women everywhere have access to reproductive health care and services. Children too suffer needlessly. It is estimated that 11 million children under the age of five die each year from preventable diseases such as measles, respiratory infections, malaria and malnutrition. The EU has set a priority goal of reducing death rates among children under the age of five by two thirds in each developing country by 2015.

Halting the spread of communicable diseases

Three main communicable diseases - HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis – are at the top of the EU’s list. As the world’s fourth largest killer disease, HIV/AIDS casts a nightmarish shadow across the globe. At the end of 2001, it was estimated that 40 million people were living with the disease, with 92% of all cases in the developing world. 99% of
the 8.8 million who develop tuberculosis each year live in developing countries; 1.7 million of these cases prove fatal. Malaria too kills 1 million people a year, with seven out of 10 deaths among children under five. It is estimated that malaria causes Africa over $12 billion in economic losses every year.

The EU is a major international donor to Health, AIDS and Population interventions in developing countries. Since 1990, around €4.6 billion has been provided by the EC to health-related interventions in more than 100 developing countries worldwide. This comes in addition to funds allocated by EU countries directly. Continued strategic action is essential. Through its Programme for Action on Communicable Diseases, the EU has launched an innovative partnership to develop a new generation of drugs to fight these diseases, and is encouraging the international community to join such partnerships. The EU is also participating in the public/private partnership of the Global Fund to fight HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis, to which it has pledged nearly $1 billion – nearly half of total pledges – of which €120 million at EC level. The next step will be to achieve closer co-operation with the private sector and civil society.

Affordable medicine

It is imperative that pharmaceutical products be made available to the developing world at the lowest possible prices. The alternative is to deprive a majority of the world’s population of decent healthcare, which would amount to a staggering failure to save life. The European Commission is continuing to work for an international consensus on global tiered pricing of pharmaceutical products.

The EU advocates the implementation of the Doha Development Agenda, developed within the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The Doha Agenda epitomises an integrated and responsible approach to globalisation that takes account of a wide range of concerns, including health. In the context of Doha, the EU advocates that members of the WTO resolve their differences on compulsory licenses before the end of 2002. Such licences would allow countries that do not have a drugs industry to arrange cheap production abroad.

The EU is keen to strengthen safeguards against the diversion for unintended use of low-priced pharmaceuticals destined for developing countries. The international community should also reaffirm that the Trade Related Intellectual Property agreement does not prevent WTO Members from taking measures to protect public health. A first step would be the implementation of the safeguards foreseen under the agreement.

Working together

The international community must harmonise procedures in this area. The European Union is encouraging all donors to support common frameworks in order to minimise transaction costs and increase efficiency for all partners. Otherwise, the best intentions and significant amounts of financial support will fail those most in need, robbing many countries of their most valuable natural resource.