

NEWS RELEASE

As Financial Crisis Worsens, Geneva Summit Pushes for Faster Health Progress

Geneva, February 5, 2009—With global trade expected to shrink in 2009 for the first time in 27 years and world growth also likely to slide to 0.9 percent, health ministers, aid and development agencies, and NGOs meeting in Geneva this week have appealed to aid donors to follow through on their foreign aid commitments for health during the crisis, citing the need to push for even faster progress in strengthening weak health systems in Africa and Asia.

At a press conference to mark the start of a Geneva health summit, organized by the International Health Partnership and Related Initiatives (IHP+), ministers, agency officials and civil society groups said it was imperative during the financial crisis not to cut back on spending and aid flows for health at the very moment that countries were making progress in reducing preventable illness and deaths for millions of the world's poorest people.

“This financial crisis could unravel many of the hard-fought gains in health over previous decades unless we all hold the line on the flow of development aid and health spending and then go even further to keep clinics open and services available,” said **Joy Phumaphi, the World Bank’s Vice President for Human Development, and a former Botswana health minister.** *“You end up with ‘lost years in health’ when aid donors and countries cut back on health during crisis because it can take 5-10 years afterwards for health services to recover to even pre-crisis levels.”*

The Geneva meeting was called to review the progress of the IHP+, an initiative set-up 18 months ago to mobilize foreign aid donors and health and development agencies behind a campaign to strengthen health systems in developing countries in Africa and Asia in order to dramatically improve their national state of health and economic performance.

“Health is not an expendable luxury item that can be dispensed with during a crisis. It is the very foundation for responding to the crisis. For me, one of the central messages of IHP+ is this: the buck stops here. Aid will not be fully effective until we find ways for better coordination, better alignment, and more accountability,” said **Dr. Margaret Chan, the Director General of the World Health Organization,** in her opening remarks to the Geneva summit.

Twenty-four countries and thirteen organizations have so far joined the IHP+, along with Rwanda and Uganda which became the newest members of the Partnership this week in Geneva. Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Nepal are the first countries to have signed IHP+ compacts which rally aid donors and other partners behind a single national plan to achieve the Millennium Development Goals for health; signed compacts then hold donors accountable for filling financing gaps in country health plans while countries pledge to fulfill agreed targets to improve people’s health.

“Ethiopia and other developing countries see the IHP process as a real opportunity to improve the quality and quantity of aid available to deliver results and bring improvements in the health of our people. We urge our development partners to work with us to find ways to maintain and scale up support in these difficult economic times,” **Ethiopia’s Health Minister, Tedros Ghebreyesus,** told the Geneva summit.

Speaking at the IHP+ press conference in Geneva, **Ivan Lewis, the UK Minister for International Development**, said that the British government remained committed to achieving 0.7% of its gross national income for development aid by 2013, including spending £6 billion on health systems and services up to 2015 and £1 billion to the Global Fund between 2008 and 2015. This includes £450m over the next three years in support of national health plans in 8 IHP countries. The UK support for Mozambique's health plan has more than doubled since the country compact had been signed and now provides a total of £38 million between 2008 and 2012.

“The global economic downturn therefore reinforces the importance of enhancing the effectiveness of the resources we all put into health. The experience of the IHP so far— particularly in Ethiopia and Mozambique—demonstrates how it can be a powerful vehicle for achieving better health results for people in low-income countries, ” the UK Minister said.

Also on the press panel, **Norway's State Secretary for International Development, Håkon Arald Gulbrandsen**, stressed the need for global community to maintain and even increase aid for health and development, especially during a time of financial and economic crisis.

“Many countries rely on external funds for a large part of their health expenditure. We know that investment in health and social areas during a time of crisis improve recovery after a crisis or recession. Norway is committed to maintaining 1% of its gross national income for development assistance and will continue the high level advocacy and mobilization for all health MDGs with a special focus on women and children”

NGOs attending the IHP+ summit also appealed to aid donors and developing countries not to retreat from their health commitments during the financial crisis. This they said would imperil progress towards achieving the health MDGs which call for combating HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, eradicating extreme hunger and malnutrition, as well as reducing child mortality and improving maternal health.

“Civil society supports the commitment of the IHP+ to increase funding to developing countries and streamline the global aid-giving machinery, but we have to guard against any attempt to re-package existing aid commitments and pass them off ‘something new,’ ” said **Sue Perez, Policy Director for the Treatment Action Group**, and northern civil society representative to the IHP+ , who is taking part in the Geneva IHP+ summit, along with other civil society members from OECD and developing countries. *“We must ensure that the IHP+ maintains its focus on real results that increase access to quality health services for real people.”*