

Impressive African health gains at risk from changing trends: WHO report

Life expectancy across Africa has improved significantly, says a new United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) report released on Thursday, but national health systems must be improved to ensure that services get to the people who need them most.

The study, launched during the 68th session of the WHO Regional Committee in Dakar, provides a snapshot of the state of health in the African region.

Emerging data shows a continued improvement, with the continent seeing the biggest jump in healthy life expectancy – time spent in full health – anywhere in the world: from 50.9 years in 2012, to 53.8 years in 2015.

Deaths resulting from the ten biggest health risks in Africa – such as lower respiratory infections, HIV and diarrhoeal diseases – dropped by half between 2000 and 2015, partly as a result of specialized health programmes.

Speaking at the launch of the report, Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, WHO's Regional Director for Africa in Dakar, expressed his pride that Africans are now living longer and healthier lives: "Nearly three years of extra health is a gift that makes us all proud. Of course, we hope that these gains will continue, and the region will reach global standards."

At the same time, the report warns that this achievement can only be sustained and expanded if health services are significantly improved, and states that the performance of health systems in the region – measured by access to services, quality of care, community demand for services and resilience to outbreaks – is low.

Chronic diseases like heart disease and cancer need to be tackled, with a person aged 30 to 70 in the region having a one in five chance of dying from a noncommunicable disease. And two critical age groups – adolescents and the elderly – are being under-served, with surveys indicating a complete lack of elder care in a third of African countries.

"Health services must keep up with the evolving health trends in the region," said Dr Moeti. "In the past we focused on specific diseases as these were causing a disproportionately high number of deaths. We have been highly successful at stopping these threats, and people's health is now being challenged by a broad range of conditions. We need to develop a new and more holistic approach to health."

This approach involves increasing spending on health, but also targeting funds in more effective ways. The report suggests that health systems that perform well invest up to 40 per cent of their budgets on their workforce, and a third on infrastructure.

Whilst it is not a scorecard, the report makes specific recommendations for each of the 47 countries of the region, and identifies areas where nations are demonstrating good practice. Examples include Algeria, with its good coverage of available health service; Kenya, which has a good range of available essential services; and Mauritius, where there is good access to services.

By improving performance, the countries named in the study have a better chance of meeting their commitment to achieve health-related targets set by the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)).