Urgent Necessity to Include Mortality of Major Infectious Diseases in the List of Proposed SDG Indicators

The five indicators proposed in the report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators to measure progress in achieving target 3.3 dealing with the fight against infectious diseases exclusively focus on the risk of infection or disease outbreak. Beyond doubt, the effort to curb this risk through effective prevention programmes represents a primary element that finally will determine the chances to end these devastating epidemics. However, the ultimate goal of confronting fatal diseases is to avoid premature deaths, which requires making use of all proven interventions from the reduction of vulnerability to specific therapy. In many cases, treatment and care represent the main options within the sphere of health systems, while risk reduction and prevention depend to a high degree on the improvement of living conditions and related behavioural changes determined by multi-sector programmes and societal development.

Leaving out the measure of mortality would mean to ignore a fundamental dimension of the response to one of the most dramatic challenges for human life, dignity and development. There is a simple solution to overcome this appalling shortfall: Just one additional indicator must be included that captures the total number of deaths caused by the major infectious diseases, namely AIDS, TB, Malaria, Hepatitis B and C viruses as well as the neglected tropical diseases. In addition, we strongly recommend preserving the life-saving treatments of HIV and TB as crucial tracer interventions to measure universal health coverage and including the medications for the other major infectious diseases.
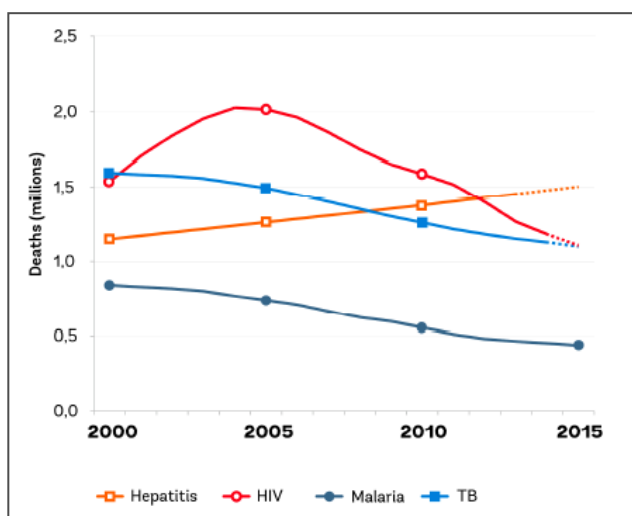
The following arguments support this proposition:

- Evidently, premature death represents the most atrocious outcome of direct and structural violence. Thus, saving human lives must constitute the fundamental guiding principle of all actions for development in general, and for health in particular. Any human progress is meaningless for dead people.

- Notwithstanding the major achievements in reaching the MDG 6, infectious diseases represent one of the main causes of premature death. In 2014 alone, 4.6 million people lost their lives due to HIV (1.2 million), TB (1.1 million HIV-negative cases), Malaria (0.44) Hepatitis B virus (0.66), Hepatitis C virus (0.67) and the NTDs (0.53). Furthermore, deaths due to these infectious diseases generally occur at younger ages than deaths related to most other causes, a fact that aggravates the human tragedy.

- Proven options of curative or suppressive treatment that prevent deaths and restore or improve health are available for the major infectious diseases, but the achieved coverage rates are still far from the required level. At present, only 40 % of people living with HIV are on antiretroviral therapy and merely 54 % of new TB cases are detected, treated and cured. Less than 5 % of chronic Hepatitis infections are diagnosed and less than 1 % of affected people receive effective treatment. Therefore, the urgent expansion of timely diagnosis and high-quality treatment of infectious diseases must be regarded as a cornerstone of the 2030 agenda.

- The most disadvantaged regions and populations of the world bear the highest burden of infectious diseases, since social marginalization and lack of resources constitute the root causes that fuel the spread of these epidemics. For the sake of justice and in accordance with the principle "to reach the furthest behind first" they require special attention in international cooperation and national efforts towards the realization of the 2030 Agenda.

- In line with these premises, the global plans and international agreements for confronting the major infectious diseases determined the reduction of mortality as one of the most essential

goals and set specific targets to achieve by 2030. These include reductions of the annual number of people dying from AIDS-related causes, TB or Malaria by 90 % as well as a 65% reduction in HBV- and HCV-related deaths.

- For all other important causes of premature death, namely maternal and child mortality, road traffic accidents, homicides as well as conflict, specific indicators to directly measure the numbers or rates of deaths were included in the list of proposed SDG indicators.

- While it is true that successful treatment, namely antiretroviral therapy, represents a critical tool to avert new infections and, therefore, incidence indirectly may reflect progress, or lack thereof, in reaching effective coverage of these life-saving interventions, it is also correct that we need a direct measure in order to determine the specific reasons for success or failure and adjust the programmatic approaches accordingly. Moreover, it would be more consistent with the above described fundamental principle to look at the purposes of prevention and treatment in a different perspective, considering that the whole continuum of health services ultimately has to contribute to the primary goal to prevent avoidable deaths.

- Rapid improvements in the production of reliable mortality and cause of death statistics in the context of civil registration and vital statistics plans are feasible with adequate resources and through implementing appropriate strategies, such as multi-sector coordination, innovative tools, capacity development, data analysis and quality assurance. These data are urgently needed in order to monitor progress towards health targets and inform decisions on health promotion but also serve a number of other essential functions from providing individuals with the official recognition and documentation to strengthening public governance, administration and accountability. Donors and countries show renewed interest in vital statistics and complementary data sources and, thus, setting appropriate indicators will support this momentum further.

- Finally, it is justifiable to group these diseases together in a global indicator for tracking mortality. Whereas the burden of disease from morbidity varies between different conditions according to the relative harm they are associated with, death represents the ultimate negative outcome irrespective of the specific cause. Simultaneously, countries should monitor mortality related to the different infectious diseases on the national level or for vulnerable populations according to sound epidemiological criteria and principles of health equity.

Estimated Number of Global Deaths due to Major Infectious Diseases

Source: Global Burden of Disease and WHO/UNAIDS estimates