The World’s Forgotten Children

Today, 25% of Africa’s children are at higher risk of death than they were ten years ago.

It is not enough to prepare our children for the world; we must also prepare the world for our children.

Luis J. Rodriguez (1954–)

The biggest killers of children under five

Main causes of child mortality 2002

- Acute respiratory infection 18%
- Diarrhoea 15%
- Malaria 11%
- Measles 5%
- Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) 4%
- Perinatal diseases (within 7 days of birth) 23%
- Deaths associated with malnutrition 54%
- Other 24%

The price of life

Annual expenditure on pet food in North America and Europe 1998

US$ 17 billion

Annual cost of scaling-up vaccination, malaria prevention and essential treatment to reach every child in the developing world 2001

US$ 7.5 billion

1990 and 2015 may be the most

over two-thirds the


Development Goals, adopted by

itself to the Millennium

against poverty, and committed

world joined together in the fight

economic structures of society.

undermine the medical, social and

ravage of the AIDS epidemic

sub-Saharan Africa, child

everywhere. In some countries of

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year in the 1970s. Yet these gains

witnessed an impressive decline in

disease in adult life.

The last three decades have

witnessed an impressive decline in

child mortality, from 17 million a

year in the 1970s. Yet these gains

have not been enjoyed
everywhere. In some countries of

sub-Saharan Africa, child

mortality is rising as wars and the

ravages of the AIDS epidemic

undermine the medical, social and

economic structures of society.

At the turn of the century, the

world joined together in the fight

against poverty, and committed

itself to the Millennium

Development Goals, adopted by


reduce by two-thirds the

under-five mortality rate between

1990 and 2015” may be the most

ambitious of these goals.

O

ver 10 million children

under five die every year—

98 per cent of them in developing
countries. Widespread

malnutrition hampers children’s

growth and development, opening

the door to the biggest killers of

children under five: perinatal
diseases, pneumonia, diarrhoea,

and malaria. This presents a sharp

contast to the situation in the

industrialized world, where junk

food and a sedentary lifestyle have

triggered an unprecedented

demand for life, opening

the door to the biggest killers of

children: diabetes and heart

disease in adult life.

Child mortality rate

Under-five mortality rate per 1000 live births

2000

Beacons of hope

greatest improvement

in child mortality rate

1970–2000

US$ 17 billion

US$ 7.5 billion

World’s Forgotten Children

Aiko is safely delivered in Kumamoto, Japan, and can expect to live about 85

years. At the same time, Mariam comes into this world in one of the poorest areas

of Freetown, Sierra Leone. She is

underweight and vitamin-deficient, and

has a 30% chance of dying before her

fifth birthday.

The biggest killers of children under five

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Poverty is the single biggest threat to children’s health. Poor children are more likely to die as infants, and are sick more often and more seriously than better-off children. The poor and the marginalized – especially children – often bear the brunt of environmental degradation. Yet, because of their vulnerability, children are the very group that can least afford to be exposed to environmental hazards. They are not “little adults”: they breathe more air, consume more food, and drink more water in proportion to their weight. Children’s behaviour further puts them at risk. Their life takes place closer to the ground and young children frequently put their fingers in their mouths.

Exposure to environmental risks is one of the reasons for poor children being worse off than their wealthier peers. In developing countries, environmental risks are compounded in the poorest settlements, where housing is inadequate, water and sanitation are lacking, garbage collection is non-existent, and smoke fouls indoor air. In rich countries, low-income or minority neighbourhoods are sometimes disproportionately located near hazardous waste sites or polluting industries.

A rising income gap between the rich and the poor within countries around the world means that millions of children may be excluded from the health benefits of emerging prosperity.

“Everyone is responsible for all.”
Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881)
Children today live in an environment that is vastly different from that of a few generations ago. Global challenges include industrialization, rapid urban population growth, the unsustainable consumption of natural resources, the increasing production and use of chemicals, and the movement of hazardous wastes across national borders.

Homes, schools, streets and fields -- the settings where children live, learn, play and work -- all present environmental hazards. Yet, children born into different countries, cities or rural areas, and even different neighbourhoods, face risks that may be poles apart.

As countries develop, many of the most serious “basic risks” to child health gradually vanish with improvements in water and sanitation, hygiene and cleaner fuels for cooking. Their decline, however, is accompanied by an increase in “modern risks”. Industrialization brings with it an increase in road traffic, air pollution, and the use of chemicals that infiltrate the air children breathe and the food they eat.

It is too early to judge the exact impact of “emerging risks”, such as endocrine disruptors and global warming. These add to the challenges we must confront to safeguard our children’s health and future.

Each year over three million children die from illnesses and other conditions caused by environmental hazards.