



Press statement

Health leaders welcome infectious disease focus at G8

Geneva, 5 July 2006 - Through its focus on global health at this year's summit in St Petersburg, Russia, the Group of Eight is helping to ensure that existing and emerging disease threats are tackled at the very highest level.

In advance of the G8 summit, the leaders of the four key health policy and financing organizations - the World Health Organization (WHO), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and the GAVI Alliance - jointly welcome the focus on infectious diseases and urge the G8 leaders to continue their commitments to improving the health and lives of people in the world's poorest countries.

The G8 leaders have long recognized that AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and vaccine-preventable diseases slow economic development, perpetuate poverty, and threaten security in large parts of the world. The recent threat of an influenza pandemic has focused international attention on the need for all countries to be better prepared, in order to reduce the potential death, illness, social and economic consequences of a pandemic.

At last year's G8 meeting in Gleneagles, leaders committed to reaching "as close as possible to universal access" to AIDS treatment by the year 2010. They also said they would work to significantly reduce HIV infections with the aim of an AIDS-free generation in Africa and scaling up the global AIDS response significantly.

The year 2005 also produced real commitments to human development. The G8 pledged to write off most of the multilateral debts in 18 of the world's poorest countries, double aid to Africa, and increase investment in health.

Dr Anders Nordström, acting Director-General of the World Health Organization, will be at the G8 summit. "The G8 commitments to health in the past have made a real difference," he said. "The focus this year on emerging and long-term threats such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, pandemic influenza and polio demonstrate that health and human health security are at the top of the global agenda. This attention by the world's wealthiest nations will directly benefit people living in all countries."

The G8 focus on health in past years led directly to strengthening the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and to the creation of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, which has leveraged pledges of \$9 billion to prevent, diagnose and treat these diseases. G8 countries and other donors have also announced the International Finance Facility for Immunisation (IFFIm). An anticipated IFFIm investment of US\$4 billion is expected to prevent five million child deaths between 2005 and 2015, and more than five million future adult deaths.

"The support demonstrated by G8 leaders for the AIDS response has been, and continues to be crucial to getting ahead of the epidemic," said Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS. "We

have made great strides in increasing access to HIV treatment and prevention services, but the epidemic continues to outpace the response. We must build on the commitments made last year to make universal access to HIV treatment, prevention and care a reality."

"In Genoa, five years ago, the G8 leaders announced the intention to create a Global Fund," said Prof. Richard Feachem, Executive Director of the Global Fund. "Since then, the G8 has been a consistently strong supporter of the Global Fund, and several millions deaths have been averted through Global Fund-supported programmes in 131 countries as a result."

"Scaling up comprehensive health services is entirely feasible and remains the common underlying platform required to underpin the numerous separate health initiatives currently underway, including the introduction of new life saving vaccines and technologies. We look to continuing support from G8 and other donor countries to reach our ambitious goals," said Dr Julian Lob-Levyt, Executive Secretary of the GAVI Alliance. "Furthermore, a G8 endorsement and launch of an Advance Market Commitment would allow us to scale up research and development of much-needed vaccines for the developing world thereby saving more lives and achieving the millennium development goals. We are now actively engaged on how GAVI together with other development partners can harmonize, align efforts and finance around country plans to rapidly scale up service delivery to meet the health MDGs," he added.

G8 countries have developed national plans to tackle pandemic influenza and have also helped to support global preparations to improve the world's ability to identify and respond to infectious disease outbreaks. However there are still gaps - places where emerging diseases, including pandemic influenza, may go unnoticed. Finding and eradicating these disease blind spots is critical. Early warning systems will save lives, reduce suffering and mitigate costs.

The G8's consistent support to polio eradication has also been instrumental in reducing the number of polio endemic countries to just four. More than half of the \$4 billion of polio funding since 1985 has been given by G8 countries.

The success of all health programmes depends on urgently addressing the health workforce crisis. The world is now short of four million health workers - with the lack of doctors, nurses and laboratory experts most acute in 57 of the world's poorest countries.

"Health workers are a pillar of any health system," said Dr Nordström. "The G8 leaders, through their direct influence over finance, health, education and migration, can make decisions which will transform the opportunities for training and retaining health workers in the places where they are most urgently needed."

The G8 takes place from 15 to 17 July in St Petersburg, Russia. The official agenda includes three issues: global energy security, infectious diseases and education.

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