

## NEWS

# World could eliminate health inequalities between nations by 2035

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The world has the financial and technical capacity to eliminate health disparities between poor and wealthy nations within a generation, says a major new report published in the *Lancet*.<sup>1</sup>

For the first time, governments and donor organisations have the power to reduce preventable deaths from infections and maternal and child mortality in all countries to the levels seen in the best performing middle income countries, it says.

Prompted by the 20th anniversary of the World Bank's 1993 world development report, which focused on investment in health, a *Lancet* commission of 25 leading experts on global health and economists revisited the case for boosting investment in health. The commission developed a new investment framework for low and middle income countries, showing where spending should be prioritised to achieve dramatic health gains by 2035. It is urging world leaders to incorporate this "grand convergence" in health into the framework for sustainable development goals after the 2015 target date for the current UN millennium development goals.

The commission's investment framework includes scaling up new and existing tools to tackle HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, neglected tropical diseases, and maternal and child illness; prioritising early investment in family planning; and focusing efforts on settings with a high burden of illness, especially poor, rural subpopulations of middle income countries.

While acknowledging that greater investment will be needed, the commission argues that predicted rises in gross domestic product in low income and middle income countries mean that countries themselves should be able to meet much of the investment required. However, global investment in research and development of new drugs, vaccines, and health technologies will need to double, the commission says, to at least \$6bn (£3.6bn; €4.4bn) a year by 2020 from the current \$3bn. It says that half this additional money could potentially come from middle income countries.

Lawrence Summers, chairman of the commission and president emeritus of Harvard University, said in a press release, "For the first time in human history we are on the verge of being able to achieve a milestone for humanity: eliminating major health inequalities, particularly inequalities in maternal and child health, so that every person on earth has an equal chance at a

healthy and productive life. The powerful drugs and vaccines now available make reaching this milestone affordable. It is our generation's unique opportunity to invest in making this vision real.

"Due to important changes in the global economy and success of development efforts, the role of international assistance, while still vital, is going to increasingly emphasise scientific research, provide templates and models that can be emulated, and focus on development of techniques and dissemination of information."

If the report's recommendations on increasing global investment in health are followed, the authors estimate that in the year 2035 alone roughly 10 million lives could be saved in low and middle income countries, bringing enormous social and economic gains in those countries.

The commission urges policymakers to adopt a "full income" approach to measuring national income, which combines not only growth in national income (GDP) but also the value that people place on increased life expectancy (the value of their additional life years (VLYs)), which is currently not considered. The value of additional life years can be inferred "from people's willingness to trade off income, pleasure, or convenience for an increase in their life expectancy," the report says.

Using the full income approach to calculate national income—as increasingly advocated by economists—means that the benefits from achieving the "grand convergence" will exceed costs by a factor of nine to 20 for low income and lower middle income countries between 2015 and 2035, the authors predict.

Dean Jamison, the commission's co-chairman and a professor at the University of Washington's Department of Global Health, said, "People value a longer and healthier life, and the notion of full income simply places that value in monetary terms. While it does not put a monetary value on an individual's life, it does place a value on changing mortality risk, which traditional notions of GDP neglect."

1 Jamison DT, Summers LH, Alleyne G, Arrow KJ, Berkley S, Binagwaho A, et al. Global health 2035: a world converging within a generation. *Lancet* 3 Dec, doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(13)62105-4.

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