The 2010 edition of UNICEF’s *Progress for Children* shows that despite advancement towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), many of the poorest and most disadvantaged children are still missing out. UNICEF invited several experts to offer their insights on what can be done to realize the MDGs for all.

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Alan Whiteside is the director of the Health Economics and HIV/AIDS Research Division (HEARD) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. He spoke with UNICEF about refocusing HIV prevention efforts in southern Africa.

Professor Whiteside – in 2008, about 4 million young people in sub-Saharan Africa were living with HIV. And the vast majority of new HIV infections occur in that region. When it comes to HIV prevention efforts there, who would you say is currently missing out?

I think there are two groups who are missing out, and both are really important. The first one is young women. What we know is that HIV infection rises dramatically in young women between the ages of about 15 and 25. So if we could address this, then I think we could go a long way towards stopping the epidemic. And the second group of people that we need to be reaching are those who are in what we call ‘discordant couples’, where one of the partners is infected and the other is not. Those are the two main groups that I’d want to reach.

*A decade ago, when the Millennium Development Goals were adopted, how was this picture any different – or was it?*

Fundamentally, we knew what was going to happen even a decade ago. It’s just that people were not prepared to take notice of it. The reality is that HIV/AIDS means that a number of the Millennium Development Goals will not be reached in a number of countries, particularly sub-Saharan African ones.

*And how about the role of poverty? Could you talk a little bit about the role of poverty?*

I think what we’re going to find is that poverty isn’t a determinant of HIV transmission, and indeed, some of the more recent data shows that people who’ve got a little bit of money tend to have higher levels of infection. But what we do know is that HIV illness tips people into poverty very rapidly. And the poor have the least ability to deal with the consequences of HIV infections.

*Why are some people missing out on HIV prevention efforts?*

The reasons people are missing out on prevention efforts are twofold. First of all, there are those who haven’t been seen as being critically important for prevention. Here the group that we would say that is true about are the discordant couples – where it’s become more and more apparent that there is HIV transmitted in long-term relationships. And the second group – the young women – is because it’s just very hard to reach this particular group. How do you empower women, how do you give them respect, how do you give them the ability to control their sex and sexuality?

*Can you talk a little bit about any specific examples that you may have encountered during your research or your fieldwork of what young people’s and children’s realities are like in terms of access to knowledge about HIV prevention?*

A very clear indication of the burden that young people face comes from Swaziland, which is where I grew up. Forty-nine per cent of girls aged between 25 and 29 are HIV infected. Also, we know that very few are infected at age 15. So there’s a massive HIV incidence between 15 and 25. And what we’ve seen there is that the consequence of this disease is that you’ve got huge numbers of orphans who are being taken in by families – the question is, where do those children get knowledge? The prevention messages are really complicated, and here we’ve got to look at who is
An interview with Alan Whiteside on ‘Achieving the Millennium Development Goals with Equity’

going to provide those messages. And as I alluded to, we have real problems around schools who can’t, teachers who won’t and parents who aren’t there. So we are going to need some innovative ways of providing messaging to young adolescents.

*How can the international community better make sure it’s not leaving out those crucial hardest-to-reach 10 per cent or 20 per cent?*

First of all, I don’t think that these people are necessarily hardest to reach. What I think is more appropriate would be to say it is hardest to see behaviour change among them. And that’s because of the structural dynamics in which people live. It’s very hard for, particularly, young women to take control of their sexuality if the societal dynamics are wrong. So what does the international community need to do? I think it is to challenge themselves to think big and to think out of the box.

For example, in a number of settings there are some very interesting experiments going on around providing cash incentives to young people to stay in school, to not fall pregnant and to not get STDs. And those experiments which are going on might provide some answers as to how we move forward. In other words, it’s not just about the disinhibition of not being infected, but it’s about some positive reward for not being infected and [for] showing you’re not infected.

*How do you see the funding environment for HIV and AIDS changing in the coming years?*

There is no doubt that the halcyon days of ever-expanding funding are over. What we’re likely to see is an increasing gap between what we need and what we get. Those of us who work in the field of HIV are going to have to make sure we make better use of the money that we have. We are not getting enough money, but we are going to have to be realistic and that’s something which activists hate to hear. But, unfortunately, realism is going to have to be the order of the day.

*Given potential budget cuts, how is it possible to maintain things at their current pace, let alone deal with the young people who are currently being left behind?*

Well, first of all, I don’t think we’re going to see budget cuts. What I think we’re going to see is a decrease in the rate of increase. Because everybody recognizes that HIV/AIDS funding is critical. Now, I don’t think we have a choice with young people. They are the future, so however we decide to prioritize our resources, we have to make sure that young people are indeed prioritized. I don’t think we can deal with the same levels of expansion, and I think that that is one of the real tragedies that we’re going to face. Now the question, then, of course is, what else can we do? And I think the answer is, we need to look at innovative ways of making better use of the resources we have.

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For more information, please visit [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)

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*Progress for Children: Achieving the Millennium Development Goals with Equity,* underscores growing evidence that progress toward achieving many of the goals has been accompanied by persistent and in some cases widening disparities. The report examines the latest available data through an equity lens, focusing on three factors – poverty, gender and geographic location of residence – that greatly affect a child’s chances of survival.