

Water, Sanitarian and Nutritional Deficiencies

Associated with high mortality rates are unsafe drinking water, poor sanitation and other conditions which affect prospects of survival. Today, we continue to have countries in West Africa in which 60 per cent of the population is without access to safe drinking water or 85 per cent without access to adequate sanitation.

Another statistic which I have also found alarming is the high percentage of stunted growth among our children. In Liberia, for example, we have found out that 18 percent of our children suffer severe stunting. UNICEF report on "The State of the World's Children" has shown similar statistics for other African countries, some as high as 29 percent. As we all know, stunting is a result of prolonged health and nutritional deficiencies. Severe or congenital stunting takes place over generations and has the effect of limiting the development of physical and mental potentials. It indicates that our health delivery system has not only failed recently but for some time past.

Immediate, Underlying and Structural Causes

There are immediate, underlying and structural causes of the high level of child and mother mortality and other health problems that afflict our children. Some of the immediate causes are infections contracted during pregnancy and at birth, poor nutritional health of mothers during pregnancies and poor environmental and personal hygiene. Underlying causes include demotivation of health workers due to poor salaries and working and living conditions, lack of access to health facilities and chronic poverty. Structural factors have to do with inappropriate policies and poor governance.

HIV/AIDS

The growing epidemic of HIV/AIDS poses a major threat to the health of all African peoples but especially to women and children. Given knowledge of the havoc HIV/AIDS is wreaking elsewhere in Africa, there is not much evidence that in West Africa, the increasing prevalence of HIV/AIDS is claiming as much national and sub-regional attention as it should. In Liberia, for example, 326 cases of AIDS-related deaths have been documented since the establishment of a government AIDS surveillance mechanism in 1987. National average of incidence of HIV is 4.5 percent at current population level. But as is the case in other parts of Africa, the full extent of the problem is not known. Suspicions are that with the reported rise in tuberculosis, pelvic inflammatory diseases and other opportunistic diseases in Liberia and a number of other West African countries, the sub-region may well be in the throes of a HIV/AIDS epidemic. Lack of education and adequate testing facilities, and the stigma associated with the disease are posing obstacles in addressing it fully. "

Human Development and Learning

Literacy and Access to School

With respect to human development and learning, the situation confronting our children stands in need of enormous improvement. To begin with, it is well known that literacy rates in Africa are low. Statistics show that by 1995, there was, perhaps, only one West African country with adult