

South Sudan has fourth highest infant mortality rate in Africa

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June 6, 2012 (JUBA) - South Sudan has the fourth highest infant mortality rate in Africa according to a report published by the African Development Banks last month.

Reacting to the banks Africa Development Report, which included South Sudan for the first time, Health Minister Michael Milly Hussein said his ministry was sparing no efforts to improve basic health services but was quick to point out that the country is "being caught up" between competing priorities.

Loosing 98% of government revenue, when South Sudan shutdown oil production due to a transit fee argument with Khartoum has meant that services in health and other areas are having to be cut back.

Despite this period of austerity minister said a lot of efforts were being exerted to "improve basic health services" in collaboration with development partners.

"We are currently sending out health workers to various places in the ten states to conduct assessment on areas of priorities, such that we are able to know what and when to do it as first thing", Hussein said in an interview with reporters on Wednesday.

The Health Minister said international health workers from different countries have been deployed across South Sudan to help provide services and share expertise.

"There are currently nurses and people with midwifery skills deployed to different places. Most of them came from the neighbouring countries through support of the United Nations Population Fund and other health partners. We are also getting technical assistance from other partner with UNICEF and World Health Organisation being some of our leading partners", explained Hussein.

Minister Hussein attributed the cause to high prevalence of preventable diseases in the rural areas due to a shortage in trained health personnel to raise public awareness about importance of "best practices" particularly health education, resulting into the rise of what he categorised as cases of diarrhea cases, cholera, typhoid and Malaria.

The African Development Report published in May named Northern Bahr el Ghazal, Western Equatoria and Warrap as some of the South Sudan's worst states for infant mortality.

"One of every 1,000 live births, 151 die before completing one year after birth in Western Equatoria, 139 in Warrap State and 129 in Northern Bahr el Ghazal. This is higher than the worst performance recorded on the continent, particularly in the African countries of Sierra Leone, Congo and Central Africa Republic", the report says.

The report further indicated that one third of children in the newly born nation suffer from malnutrition, while 47% of the population remains undernourished.

Solomon Angui Mayuot, a newly appointed minister of health in Warrap State also attributed the high rate of death in children under five to prevalence of high malaria case in the rural areas. He also mentioned lack of equipments to help diagnose preventable and curable diseases. Other causes, according to Mayuot, include shortfall in trained health workers to run existing health facilities, essential medical supplies and public awareness.

Northern Bahr el Ghazal State, according to the report, has been ranked the poorest state in the whole country, with three quarters of the population living below the poverty line. Unity State, is South Sudan's second poorest state with two thirds of the population classified as poor.

A United Nations report in May estimated that half of the entire population of the new nation as food insecure, indicating that food intake had fallen below minimum required in 2009. It identified Western Bahr el Ghazal as a state with worst performance in food production, resulting into almost three quarters of the population taking less than the required calories a day.

"In South Sudan two decades of conflict have severely suppressed agriculture development", the report notes, adding, "At independence in 2011, total livestock production was estimated at a fifth of potential and fish at tenth production".

The report which relied on the national statistics notes that 78% of the population of the newest nation depends entirely on farming for their livelihood but attributed the cause in low food production to threats it identified as irregularities in rainfalls in most of the areas, mainly in the states of Northern Bahr el Ghazal, Warrap, Unity, Western Bahr el Ghazal, Upper Nile and

parts of Jonglei where violence and insecurity have played negative impact on farming activities.

Other difficulties which the report identified includes lack of agriculture extension services, adaptation of the local population to modern agricultural techniques as well as difficulties in acquiring seeds and fertilizers, weak physical infrastructure and high transportation costs. Additional factors included trade restrictions between South Sudan and neighbouring Sudan, impacting negatively on dependency on international trade and food prices and the threat of conflict.

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