Reviewer's report

Title: Progress towards the achievement of MDG4 in the Commonwealth of Independent States: uncertain data, clear priorities.

Version: 1 Date: 10 November 2009

Reviewer: Mary Ethna Black

Reviewer's report:

Does it address an important or timely issue?

Yes, the area of maternal and child health in CIS countries is important, under-documented and the data available should be presented and discussed, so this is a valuable contribution. Also this research team has produced quite a bit of work collaborating between UNICEF and a national research group in Italy, and they have developed a good way of analyzing and reporting on data in this tricky and under reported area. Maternal and child health is a subject with renewed interest and readers will want to look at patterns from this region as there is little in the way of analysis and commentary published.

2. Is it well reasoned?

On the whole, yes. It takes that available reported data from national sources that have been submitted to the UN. Perhaps it could emphasize more that there are factors that may impact on this data before it gets submitted, including political interference, loss of data, and poor quality of data collection in country. Thus the data being analyzed does not present a fully accurate picture. This is however where we stand right now.

3. Is it relatively balanced, or does it make plain where the author's opinions might not represent the field as a whole?

There is little reference to national level reports or literature; it is mainly a review of UNICEF data collated from the countries and then other meta analysis and reports. This is an ongoing problem, how to cite and include references that may be in national languages or may not be published in the international literature. I am not sure how it can be solved and it is a bigger issue than just for this paper.

4. Is the standard of writing acceptable?

Paragraphs could be shorter, some duplication removed and the ordering within paragraphs could be better. There are also some minor grammatical errors and a very occasional lack of consistency in country names (e.g. Kazakstan, Kazachstan), but nothing that a good sub-edit could not fix.

• Major Compulsory Revisions

The issue of reliability of reporting is not addressed in enough detail. This may be a cause for some of the variation and it is certainly a cause, as the authors point
out, for the sudden drops when new data such as DHS surveys are available, as this is generally seen as more reliable than the routine data collection systems in many countries. It would be interesting to note how many of the countries have had alternative data and how many of these resulted in drops. There may be others that have not yet had alternative data available and so overall the picture may be even bleaker than is reported in this paper (alternative data rarely if ever show the picture is better than routine reporting). We know that some countries base their reporting to the UN on modified trends, that there are gaps in reporting, that quality control within data collection systems are weak. This is especially true for neonatal mortality, for countries that are post-conflict and where there is an older pyramidal style of reporting that has little in the way of audit. This could be discussed when looking at comparisons between countries and perhaps some estimate made for countries about reliability of data systems. I think this is a really important area that could be brought out much more in the paper. (one useful project was the World Bank funded neonatal programme in Macedonia in 2000 http://web.worldbank.org/WEBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/MACEDONIAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:20200320~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:304473,00.html which showed I think a 30% under reporting in neonatal mortality (although this does not come out clearly on the website), this was adjusted for and then the subsequent intervention showed a marked improvement of 36% which would have been missed if the underreporting had not been corrected first. Neonatal figures are more unreliable than almost any other data in this area.

The next is the issue of subnational trends. There are clear gradations within countries based on disparities (economic, geographical, ethnic etc) and so national pictures simply offer an overview and hide the details. A roma child is likely to be universally worse off across a range of countries, this is just one example. Wealth, education mothers and children are likely to do well wherever they are located. There may not be space within the paper to comment on this in detail but it would be important to at least refer to it. This would also make sense in the conclusion section. Improving the health status of mothers and children in this region requires attention to disparities and programme aimed at certain groups – as a much great burden of disease and death falls within those groups.

• Minor Essential Revisions

Some are noted above. Also consider adding in World Health survey and other potential sources of data, as well as DHS and MICS in the opening section.

• Discretionary Revisions

Under Discussion, the issue of decreased access is addressed, but one of the causes is not i.e. formally reduced access where health care systems that were previously open to all become more inaccessible due to “reforms” many of which have been encouraged by the World Bank and other donors and development partners.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable
Declaration of competing interests:

'I declare that I have no competing interests'