

Cash-for-vaccination rates 'exaggerated'

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By Andrew Jack in London

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Developing countries funded by donors on the basis of their success in boosting immunisation rates have exaggerated their results, according to a study published in the Lancet on Friday.

At the most extreme, Niger and Mali claimed child immunisation rates twice as high as the levels confirmed by independent surveys, found research led by Christopher Murray at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington in Seattle.

The study raises concerns about the operation of the UN-backed Global Alliance on Vaccines and Immunisation (Gavi). The organisation which pools donor countries' funds to support immunisation and has paid out more than \$100m (€77m, £68m) through its Immunisation Support Services programme, which offers \$20 per child vaccinated to countries with which it works.

It also casts doubts on performance-based funding, an approach to rewarding results that has become increasingly fashionable across a broad range of programmes to assist the developing world in recent years.

Variants of the system are used by international institutions including the Global Fund to fight Aids, TB and Malaria, and are being promoted by the World Bank with support from donors including the Norwegian government.

The research comes at an embarrassing time, as Gavi attempts to raise further money to boost vaccination programmes and as development assistance more generally is under threat during the economic downturn.

"In the presence of incentives, you get a not surprising tendency to over-report success," said Prof Murray. "The solution is independent, contestable verification." His study showed immunisation rates by 2006 in 193 countries for diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis were 74 per cent, against 90 per cent reported by Gavi.

Partly in response to his findings, Gavi hosted a meeting with international donors in London this week, including the UK and Norway. Julian Lob-Levyt, head of Gavi, said there was some evidence to suggest over-reporting of immunisation rates by countries, but he stressed there was no indication that performance-related funds had been siphoned off and stolen. He said it had been used to support government health programmes.

The new study also had limitations, he said, because it was based on questionnaires to individuals asked to recall when and which immunisations had been given in the past; and because it was historical it could not be used by managers to improve performance.

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