



Health

“Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.” - Principle 1, 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development

Ill health hampers economic and social development, triggering a vicious cycle that contributes to unsustainable resource use and environmental degradation. While global health has improved markedly over the last 50 years, great global challenges continue to constrain sustainable development. Leading up to the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), United Nations (UN) Secretary General Kofi Annan proposed the WEHAB Initiative, highlighting Water and sanitation, Energy, Health, Agriculture and Biodiversity and ecosystem management as five key areas where concrete results are both necessary and attainable¹. Tackling the global disease burden will require intersectoral approaches to invest in improvements in people's health and their environment in the pursuit of poverty reduction and sustainable development.

Unsafe Drinking Water and Poor Sanitation

More than one billion people lack access to safe drinking water and more than twice that number lack adequate sanitation. This has life-threatening consequences - more than two million people in developing countries, most of them children, die each year from diseases caused by lack of access to safe drinking water, inadequate sanitation and water-borne diseases.² Diarrhoeal diseases are the deadliest, killing a child every 15 seconds around the world.³ Many more children suffer from nonfatal diarrhoea that leaves them underweight, physically stunted, and vulnerable to disease. People in rural areas are the most affected, although urbanisation is bringing increasing numbers to densely populated cities, where they often face shortages of potable water supplies and sanitation, as well as growing pollution.

Malaria and other epidemics such as cholera and typhoid are also closely linked with polluted water sources and poor sanitation. More than one million people die each year of malaria. Ninety percent of these deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa. Most of these deaths are among children - more than 3,000 African children die of malaria every day.⁴ The prevalence of malaria is strongly related to human factors such as irrigation and agricultural practices, deforestation, and land clearing. Higher temperatures, heavier rainfall, and other climate changes also increase the risk.

Air Pollution

- **Indoor:** More than three million people die each year from air pollution - two-thirds of them poor people, mainly women and children, who die from pollution caused by the burning of biomass fuels such as wood, animal dung, or crop residues.⁵ Indoor pollution can cause or aggravate Acute Respiratory Infections (ARIs), one of the leading causes of child mortality in developing countries, and increase child mortality from measles, malaria, and other diseases.
- **Outdoor:** More than one billion people in urban areas are exposed to life-threatening levels of air pollution due to transportation, energy production, construction and industrial activities - a number that is expected to increase.⁶ Outdoor air pollution contributes to ARIs, asthma, and lung cancer. Air pollution also damages plant and animal life and contaminates water sources, threatening economic and social welfare as well as human well-being.⁷

¹ UN Secretary General, "Towards a Sustainable Future" 14/05/2002.

² WHO, The Right to Water (Geneva: WHO, 2003.)

³ WHO/UNICEF, Joint Monitoring Programme on Water Supply and Sanitation, Assessment 2000 Report (Geneva: WHO, 2000.)

⁴ WHO, Africa Malaria Report (Geneva: WHO, 2003.)

⁵ WEHAB Working Group, A Framework for Action on Health, Geneva: UN, 2002.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Exposure to Toxic and Hazardous Materials

Development activities, including industrialisation and modernised agriculture have many benefits but – uncontrolled - can adversely affect the quality of the physical and social environment and increase human morbidity and mortality. Pesticides poison millions of people each year through direct exposure during pesticide use and the consumption of pesticide residues in food. Growing human consumption of heavy metals for industrial activity, transportation and other activities has led to increased risk of exposure to hazardous agents such as lead, mercury and cadmium. Other toxins including nitrates, arsenic, and fluoride also poison people through contaminated food and drinking water and other sources.

HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS continues to ravage families, communities and countries around the world. Twenty million people have already died of AIDS, and most of the 40 million people now living with HIV are likely to die a decade or more prematurely. About 92 percent of all cases are in developing countries, and more than half of all new HIV infections occur among people under age 25. In places hardest hit by the pandemic, infections among women are increasing rapidly. Rising HIV infection rates among women expose children to increased HIV risk before they are born - at the end of 2001, 2.7 million children were living with AIDS.

The effects of AIDS extend to nearly every dimension of social and economic life, robbing employees from the labour force and providers and caregivers from families. HIV/AIDS stalls hard-won educational gains - killing teachers faster than they can be trained, and pulling AIDS orphans out of schools when extended families cannot afford to educate all of the children of the household. Already more vulnerable than boys to HIV infection, girls are also more vulnerable to dropping out of school to care for sick relatives or assume other domestic duties. AIDS also slows economic growth and worsens poverty, forming a vicious cycle in which HIV/AIDS drives families into poverty, while poverty accelerates the spread of HIV. Without a coordinated and massive response to the epidemic, millions of lives will continue to be lost and gains in health and development reversed in many countries.

International Commitments

Major UN conferences over the past decades - including the 1992 Earth Summit, the 2000 Millennium Summit, and the 2002 WSSD and other meetings on ozone-depleting substances, hazardous wastes, pesticides and persistent organic pollutants - have addressed the relationship between health, environment and development and the need to improve health in order to achieve sustainable development. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provide key targets to address the most pressing development needs. Three of the eight goals relate to health concerns: reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; and combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases, while several others are of crucial importance to achieving health goals.

UNESCO's Role: Health and Education for Sustainable Development

World leaders have agreed at several international meetings that education is a powerful tool for meeting goals aimed at poverty reduction, improved health and social well-being, and sustained economic growth. UNESCO has built partnerships with Governments, civil society groups, and other UN and international agencies to meet important education and literacy targets. The education sector also has an essential advocacy role to play in highlighting the links between health, environment, and sustainable development. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) can play a key role in linking the health of people to the health of and sustainability of ecosystems through interdisciplinary, student-centred learning and an emphasis on decision-making skills for a sustainable future.

UNESCO has a dual role in relation to ESD: first as a substantive implementer of ESD - accelerating education reforms and coordinating activities of multiple stakeholders to implement ESD at international, regional, and country levels. Second, UNESCO also acts as the lead agency in the promotion of the Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). The Decade offers an opportunity for UNESCO and its partners to advance progress made in human resource development, education and training to ensure results in meeting current and future needs for good health and a healthy environment.

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