



Health: A Pathway to Sustainable Development

At the end of August, world leaders will meet in Johannesburg to assess what has been achieved in the 10 years since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (also known as the UN Conference on Environment and Development) and to set out a plan for the future.

We have seen some significant progress on environmental issues, including new global conventions, reduced pollution in many countries, and greater awareness of the value and importance of sound environmental policies. A legal international framework for environmental protection is slowly but surely being built.

Still, progress is too slow. Signs of environmental degradation and abject poverty constantly urge us to move faster. We are still far from the point at which human activity is adjusted to the limits of what our global environment can support. We still cannot fulfill our needs in a world free from poverty without compromising future generations' ability to do the same.

My own message for Johannesburg is clear: health has to be a key element in work toward a common future. We cannot achieve the goals of sustainable development in the face of widespread ill health, particularly among poor people. Improving healthy life is not only a desirable outcome of sustainable development, it is also a powerful and undervalued means of achieving it. Poor people who are sick cannot earn and cannot learn.

Sustainable development is about the relationship between society and our planet. There are health conditions—of which HIV/AIDS is but the most prominent—and serious risks to health that threaten our very future.

Fortunately, health is no longer seen, as it was 10 years ago, just in terms of social services. It is an investment with

a major economic return: scaling up spending on health by developing countries and donors toward \$66 billion a year could save around 8 million lives and generate a six-fold economic return.

Some of the greatest risks to health are in the physical environment. Diarrheal and respiratory diseases are intimately, but preventably, linked with poor living conditions, inadequate and contaminated water, dirty household fuels, and unsafe food.

The environmental link does not stop there: as natural resources are depleted or degraded, livelihoods are affected. The vicious cycle is perpetuated. It must be broken.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has identified water and sanitation, energy, health, agriculture, and biodiversity as five key areas for which the Summit can and must obtain concrete results.

The complex network of relationships and causation among these five areas should not keep us from action. There is much that health professionals can do:

- We can make the case for more resources for health in the context of sustainable development, because we know how to spend them well.
- We have clear and quantifiable goals on which donors and developing countries agree.
- We know what can be achieved through partnerships and alliances; for example, in stimulating development of new drugs for malaria and tuberculosis and vaccines for HIV; in increasing coverage of vital immunizations through the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations; and for mobilizing new resources through the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria

- We know where new partnerships are needed: to mobilize a sustained, advocacy-led campaign that will ensure safer and healthier environments for children.

Children are key in this equation. Not only are they our future, but we know children suffer most from environmental degradation. They are more vulnerable to many waterborne infections. Their intake of toxins may be higher relative to their body weight than that of adults, and they are developing physically and mentally.

In its work toward sustainable development, WHO will focus on safeguarding the environment for children. By launching a "Safe Places for Children Initiative," we will, in partnership with UNICEF and others, work to drastically reduce death and morbidity for the world's children by building healthier and safer spaces to grow up in.

The risks to which children are likely to be exposed, and to which they are particularly vulnerable, are many: pathogens in water, difficulties with maintaining hygiene, lack of sanitation, insect vectors of disease, smoke in the home from burning solid fuels, passive tobacco smoking, unsafe and unhealthy food, solid waste, unintentional injuries, traffic injuries, and exposure to lead, pesticides, and other poisons.

These risks are relevant not only for the developing world. Their relative importance varies, and so does the scale of the risks involved. They increase in poorer households, and at times of crisis as a result of a natural disaster, conflict, or breakdown in government services. But these risk factors should concern all of us who deal with children's health.

—Gro Harlem Brundtland, MD
Director-General,
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