FACTS ABOUT... Health

The Problem

Sustainable development is not possible without a healthy population—yet most development activities have impacts on the environment, which can in turn cause or exacerbate many health problems. Poor health and disease are costly. HIV/AIDS has killed millions of people in their most productive years, while water and air pollution continue to kill millions of people every year, mostly in developing countries.

World Health Organization Director-General Gro Harlem Brundtland has pointed out that HIV prevalence rates of 10 to 15 per cent – which are no longer uncommon – can translate into a reduction in growth rate of GDP per capita of up to 1 per cent a year. Tuberculosis, which is exacerbated by HIV, takes an economic toll equivalent to $12 billion from the incomes of poor communities, she noted, adding that "Africa's GDP would probably be about $100 billion more now if malaria had been tackled 30 years ago, when effective control measures first became available."

Key Statistics

- Some 11 million children under the age of five die each year in developing countries. About 70 per cent of these deaths are caused by either diarrhoeal diseases, respiratory infections, malaria, measles or malnutrition, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).
- Research suggests that over 40 per cent of the global burden of disease due to environmental risk factors may fall on children under five, even though they only constitute about 10 per cent of the world's population.
- Between 5 and 6 million people in developing countries die each year from water-borne diseases and air pollution.
- Poor environmental quality contributes to 25 per cent of all preventable illness in the world today.
- More than 60 million people have been infected with HIV/AIDS — the world's fourth largest killer — since the epidemic began. At the end of 2001, it was estimated that 40 million people were living with the disease, with a third of those between the ages of 15 and 24. About 92 per cent of all cases are in developing countries.
- Every year, some 8.8 million people develop active tuberculosis and 1.7 million die of the disease. Ninety-nine per cent of all TB sufferers live in developing countries. Most are poor and are between 15 and 54 years old.
- Between 2000 and 2020, nearly 1 billion additional people will be infected with TB, 200 million people will become sick, and 35 million will die of the disease, unless current efforts to control TB are greatly strengthened and expanded.
- In the year 2000, 1.3 million children under five in developing countries died from diarrhoeal diseases caused by unsafe water supply, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene.
- Malaria kills some 1 million people a year, over 70 per cent of them children under five. Almost 90 per cent of fatal malaria cases occur in sub-Saharan Africa. It is estimated that malaria causes economic losses in Africa in excess of $12 billion a year.
- Sixty per cent of the 2.2 million deaths a year in children under five caused by acute respiratory infections are associated with indoor air pollution (mostly from burning biomass fuels in confined spaces), lack of adequate heating and other unsanitary living conditions.

What Needs to Be Done

At the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000, Member States agreed to take action on a wide range of issues, many of which impact directly on health. They agreed that, by 2015, governments will:

- Reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day;
- Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger;
- Reduce by two thirds the mortality rate among children under five;

- Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio;
- Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS; and
- Halt and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.

According to the Commission on Macroeconomics and Health, which was established by WHO to explore the links between health and economic development, investment in health in developing countries saves lives and produces clear and measurable financial returns. Well-targeted spending of $66 billion a year by 2015 could save as many as 8 million lives a year and generate six-fold economic benefits, more than $360 billion a year by 2020.

Proposals for the Johannesburg Summit that are presently under consideration include actions to: include health concerns in policies and programmes for sustainable development; strengthen the delivery of basic health services; increase efforts to eradicate malaria, tuberculosis, dengue fever and other diseases in an environmentally sound way; reduce the health effects associated with traditional cooking and heating; promote cleaner fuels; improve access to safe water and sanitation; support efforts to fight HIV/AIDS; and ensure intellectual property rights for traditional medicines and knowledge.