



Human health and Global ecosystem change

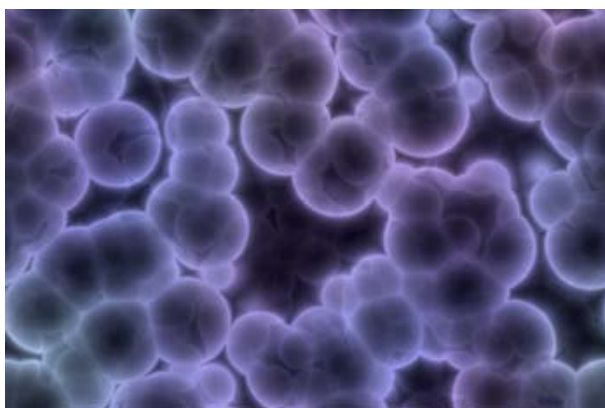
In 1978, the global community came together at Alma Ata (then in the USSR) to affirm a commitment to delivering health for all the world's peoples by the year 2000. This commitment centred on the concept of universal primary health care – front line health intervention and support at the community level available to all people – as the core component of equitable health care systems.

In 1998 at the 51st World Health Assembly, the member states of the World Health Organisation adopted the World Health Declaration, the “Health for All” principles for the 21st Century, reaffirming the commitment of the international community to the principles set out at Alma Ata. This recognised health as a fundamental human right, and affirmed that securing human health and well-being is the ultimate aim of social and economic development. It also recognised the interdependency of nations and communities in securing health, and the need for co-operation across borders and boundaries to facilitate the delivery of equitable health care.

The past two decades have seen major social, political, economic and environmental upheavals that continue to challenge health policy and health care systems at all levels. Prior to the Alma Ata meeting, scientific breakthroughs that produced new antimicrobials and novel therapies helped to create a belief in a future that could be free from the threat of infectious disease. In subsequent years the theory of the health transition gained importance, as increased economic growth in many countries led to changes in demographics and epidemiologic profiles, infectious diseases being replaced by non-communicable diseases as major causes of illness and death. Development and technology promoted better health and longer life, or so it seemed. But that confidence has been challenged by food, energy and economic crises and new threats associated with global environmental change, risks which transcend borders and economic conditions.

Globalisation has seen the most remote areas of the world connected by the expansion in communications, travel and trade. As a result, determinants of community health and well-being are now understood on a global scale to a greater extent than ever before, as are the major environmental issues which affect us. We understand now that sustainable health care systems are a prerequisite for sustainable development, not just a result of it.

Today's global health landscape is dominated by newly emerging and resurgent infectious diseases, the growing threat of antimicrobial resistance, poverty, nutrition insecurity, climate change and ecosystem degradation. In 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the U.N. Secretary General's WEHAB framework (Water, Energy, Health, Agriculture and Biodiversity) called for new governance systems to take account of these connections, encouraging cross-sector partnership.



The reports of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and other research suggests that many societies are facing into a new health transition as a result of biodiversity loss and ecosystem change, where emerging health risks, including new and resurgent infectious diseases and risks associated with natural disasters and climatic extremes, are becoming as important as “old” infections and non-communicable disease as drivers of morbidity and mortality. With the growing awareness that the goals set out at Alma Ata and reaffirmed in the *Health for All* Declaration are dependent upon ecosystem sustainability, co-operation on issues of health and biodiversity is increasingly important.





The COHAB Initiative works to assist with the implementation of ecosystem approaches to health and well-being, addressing a number of critical issues:

- Since the functioning of ecosystems and the sustainability of the goods and services they provide are dependent on biodiversity, then biodiversity represents the foundation for human health. Stated more simply: without a global environment that is healthy and capable of supporting a diversity of life, no human population can exist.
- The conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity represents the critical element in delivering healthy and secure futures for all communities. In as much as the loss of biodiversity puts the well being of many human populations at risk, its conservation and sustainable use can help to protect against natural disasters, combat poverty and hunger, prevent disease outbreaks, and promote stability and security for millions of people worldwide. In this context, biodiversity and ecosystem services may be particularly important to reducing, or adapting to, the health impacts of climate change.
- Barriers to sustainable health created by the loss of essential ecosystem goods and services represent a barrier to the achievement of the basic human right to health, and compromise efforts to achieve universal primary health care.
- Some of what are arguably the most important health services provided by biodiversity - provision of fresh water and clean air, the regulation of the global climate, the provision of food resources, and the regulation of pests and diseases - are under particular threat on a global level. Thus it becomes increasingly important not only to protect the remaining ecosystems, but also to restore and enhance degraded ecosystems throughout the world.
- When a community draws on services and resources produced by ecosystems elsewhere, this may also place pressure on those ecosystems and increase health risks for local communities in other areas. In other words, for any human community, the causes, risks and consequences of ecosystem disruption may extend far beyond their immediate locality. Magnified on a global scale, this gives concern for global ecological stability, with very real consequences for global health.



The Conference of the Parties to the CBD has worked to promote co-operation with the health sector, including strengthening links with the World Health Organisation. However, much more needs to be done to ensure that these two sectors, which work towards the protection of life support systems, are interconnected in policy and practice.

The importance of biodiversity and its fundamental role in securing our health and well-being has not yet been fully adopted by decision makers. As Eric Chivian and Aaron Bernstein state in their book *Sustaining Life*: “not only are the full dimensions of biodiversity loss failing to inform policy decisions, but the general public, lacking an understanding of the health risks involved, is not grasping the magnitude of the biodiversity crisis....Tragically, aesthetic, ethical, religious, even economic arguments have not been enough.”



About COHAB

The COHAB Initiative (Co-operation on Health and Biodiversity) is an international programme of work established to address the gaps in awareness, policy and action on the links between human health and well-being and the conservation of biological diversity. The Secretariat of the COHAB Initiative is based in Galway, Ireland. Visit www.cohabnet.org or email info@cohabnet.org for more information.