



World Health
Organization



République
Gabonaise



United Nations
Environment Programme

First Inter-Ministerial Conference on Health and Conference in Africa Health Security through Healthy Environments

BACKGROUND

The Issue

The links between development, environment and health are more pronounced in Africa than in any other continent by virtue of its unique high level of endemicity seen in a number of communicable diseases with strong links to the environment, and the relative fragility of its ecosystems. The series of extreme weather events and natural disasters, as well as the emergence or re-emergence of disease threats, in recent history has been a harsh reminder of the critical linkages between human health and environmental conditions, as well as the long-term and immediate human, social and economic costs of ignoring these.

The continent continues to face development challenges such as weak health systems, lack of access to safe drinking water and access to safe hygiene and sanitation; poorly designed irrigation and water systems; road and building construction activities; inadequate housing; poor waste disposal and water storage. Yet, it also has to cope with new and emerging issues, including the effects on health of climate change, accelerated urbanization as well as water and air pollution.

The African continent is rich in natural resources and it has a potentially strong human resource base to sustain flourishing economies. Yet this potential resource is seriously undermined by ill-health and mismanagement of the continent's natural wealth resulting in considerable ecosystem degradation. While Africa possesses the potential for sustainable development, the conditions for these to come to fruition are dismal unless a deliberate effort is made to address these crucial environmental and health problems which are among the leading factors hindering economic development on the continent.

As the continent's environmental benefits are being degraded, Africa is lagging behind in providing preventive public health strategies that its people need to protect them against the resulting health risks. Potentially avoidable environmental risks currently cause almost a quarter of the total burden of disease. Environmental hazards and ecosystem degradation are responsible for around *one-quarter* of the total burden of disease worldwide, and about *one-third* of all death and disease in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa. Such environmental risks include unsafe water, air pollution, poor sanitation, inadequate waste disposal, unsafe vector control, exposure to chemicals and injuries.

From an environmental perspective, there is concern over Africa's land under pressure from a growing population, desertification, water stress, declining biodiversity, deforestation, increasing dust storms, rising pollution and rapid urbanization, natural disasters such as drought and floods, chemicals hazards, and poverty, particularly as climate change is emerging as a driving force behind many of these problems and is likely to intensify the already dramatic transformations taking place across the continent.

The Solution

Improving human well-being is at the core of sustainable development efforts in Africa. Poor environmental conditions cause a large proportion of the global burden of disease but maintenance of environmental goods and services underpins all aspects of human health and well-being. The continent has a tremendous wealth of natural resources and human capital. For development to succeed, it is critical to build on these assets—protecting natural capital for future generations, while also strengthening human capital.

Greater efforts are required to protect human health and move toward environmental sustainability in Africa. Although an increasing will is emerging on the part of African governments to improve environmental conditions in order to protect the health and well-being of their populations, nowhere in Africa, up to this time, has the power of synergies between health and environment sectors been used to its maximum potential.

In response to this challenge, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in partnership with the Government of Gabon are organizing the first ever inter-ministerial conference on health and environment in Africa in Libreville, Gabon, from 26-29 August 2008.

The Libreville Declaration will be adopted reaffirming the commitments made at the Conference.

