

## Health footprint

*"We shall not finally defeat AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, or any of the other infectious diseases that plague the developing world until we have also won the battle for safe drinking-water, sanitation and basic health care."* **Kofi Annan, former United Nations Secretary-General**

### So what is a health footprint?

This can be seen as the impact that actions and decisions made by individuals, groups and governments have on the health of individuals and communities around the world. The actions and decisions may be environmental, e.g. how and where clean water is supplied; economic, e.g. whether to fund a local health clinic; or political, e.g. whether those most in need are given priority. In turn, the health or unhealthiness of people and communities has huge social and economic impacts on the whole of society.

## Health: not just the absence of disease

The World Health Organisation has described health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease.

The health of individuals, groups and communities has links to many related issues such as food and agriculture, education, water and sanitation, gender and climate change.

Poverty is one of the key issues affecting the health of communities. The world's poorest people suffer the most from ill health: they face more serious illnesses, more often and their country's are the least able to provide basic healthcare services to promote good health and prevent illness.

There have been great gains in health over the last 50 years as the result of improvements in income and education, with accompanying improvements in nutrition, hygiene, housing, water supplies, and sanitation.

However these gains have been unequally distributed with the most notable health improvements occurring in the richer countries of the world. The poorest, and particularly people living in sub-Saharan Africa, have not only been left behind, but have had to face new challenges such as HIV/AIDS too.

The underlying threats to good health are well known and affordable solutions are available. What's lacking is the political will to make it happen and effective policies and programmes to deliver good health to all.

### Health footprint: how it measures up

- Almost 20 million children worldwide are severely **malnourished**.
- Globally, pneumonia is the largest single cause of death in children under five years of age; out of 154 million cases each year, three-quarters occur in just 15 countries.
- A child dies from malaria in Africa every 30 seconds; it is the leading cause of death in Africa among under-fives.
- An estimated 2.3 million children are living with HIV; more than half of all HIV-infected children die before their second birthday.
- Two-thirds of all child deaths are preventable through low-cost actions
- 600 000 deaths occurred worldwide as a result of weather-related natural disasters in the 1990s; 95% of them in developing countries.
- Worldwide, 13 million deaths could be prevented every year by making our environments healthier.
- 2.5 million children under the age of five die every year worldwide due to diseases that can be prevented with vaccines; immunization (vaccination) currently saves between 2 and 3 million lives per year.
- Deaths from measles has decreased from 757 000 deaths in 2000 to 242 000 deaths in 2006; the biggest improvement occurred in Africa, where number of deaths fell by almost 100%
- Worldwide, a woman dies every minute due to difficulties during pregnancy and childbirth; most of these deaths are avoidable with the correct interventions.

## **Walking very unequal paths**

The issue of health affects us all and is dependent on four broad factors: human biology, environmental factors, lifestyle, and the quality of healthcare services available. However, the ways in which these factors affect individuals and communities varies widely depending on where we live.

Most of us in the developed world can expect in the average year just minor sufferings caused by flu and cold viruses, but in developing countries serious diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis and measles are the norm.

A major environmental factor affecting people's health is water quality, especially the health of infants and children. Again there is a stark contrast here: clean water is something we in the West take for granted, yet 1 in 6 of the world's population do not have access to clean drinking water.

When it comes to lifestyle, an inactive and 'junk-food culture' lifestyle may lead to **obesity** in the rich countries of the world; living in a slum and trying to make a living by rummaging through a rubbish tip may lead to **malnutrition** (already in glossary see Food) and illness in poor countries. Around 133 million people are categorized as overweight in the United States while 140 million children are classified as underweight in the developing world. Yet even within countries where hunger is common there are problems of obesity: overweight is a common problem for middle and upper class people in India for example.

As for healthcare, health services in developed countries offer all kinds of treatments and medications which prolong life for as long as possible. But people in developing countries often don't even have access to basic healthcare with painful and long-term suffering often the result.

## **HIV – not a positive footprint**

It is estimated that about 14,000 people become newly infected with HIV every day and more than half of these are between the age of 15 and 24. AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) is a result of the HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) which is passed from one person to another through blood and sexual contact. Pregnant women can also pass HIV to their baby during pregnancy or delivery; only one in three HIV positive pregnant women in poor countries has access to the treatment needed to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

Being HIV-positive, or having HIV disease, is not the same as having AIDS. Many people are HIV-positive but don't get sick for many years. However, as the disease continues, it slowly wears down the immune system – the system within the body which fights infection and disease – and eventually becomes AIDS when the immune system has become seriously damaged.

As this happens, viruses, infections and bacteria which normally the body can fight off become more dangerous and without effective treatments these infections can kill.

There is no cure for AIDS or HIV. There are only drugs, known as anti retroviral drugs, which slow down the HIV virus and slow down the damage to the body's immune system.

**Did you know? The impact of HIV/AIDS will affect lives for many generations to come? Examine the following and think about how AIDS could have a devastating affect for years to come.**

### **Facts:**

- An estimated 42 million people are living with HIV/AIDS.
- More than 20 million people have died from AIDS.
- Four million children have been infected since the virus first appeared.
- About one in 12 African adults is living with HIV/AIDS.

HIV/AIDS is the deadliest epidemic of our time. In many countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa AIDS has spread rapidly, leaving illness, death and poverty in its wake. But even if a cure was found, many people would be left not just with the misery inflicted by the illness today, but also the impacts on their future tomorrow. For example:

- If one or both parents of children die from AIDS, they can suddenly become orphans and find it very difficult to stay at school. *What impact will this have for the future?*
- HIV/AIDS tends to weaken and kill many people in their young adulthood. *What impact will this have for the future?*
- Many healthcare workers and teachers are also being affected by HIV/AIDS. *What impact will this have for the future?*

**Here are some of the reasons you may have thought of...**

- By forcing children to drop out of school, AIDS could result in future generations being less knowledgeable and skilled and so less able to contribute to income generation in their families or society at large.
- AIDS damages economies by killing off skilled and able workers in their most productive years for income generation and when they play an important role in passing on skills and knowledge.
- AIDS causes the breakdown of families by removing a whole generation that is so important for caring both for the younger and older persons in society.

**What other long term impacts of HIV/AIDS can you think of? See a page from the organisation Avert to help you identify [the impacts of HIV/AIDS](#)**

**A large carbon footprint kicking at the heels of health**

Evidence of the impacts rising carbon emissions are having on the climate continues to grow and with climate change comes implications for public health.

Climate and weather already exert strong influences on health: through deaths in heat waves, and in natural disasters such as floods, as well as influencing life-threatening diseases such as malaria.

Continuing climate change will affect some of the most important basics of good health: quality food, clean air and safe water and regions of the world with weak healthcare systems, namely the poorest countries, will be the least able to cope.

Increasing global temperatures affect levels of pollutants and plant pollen, which can trigger asthma. About 300 million people suffer from asthma, and 255 000 people died of the disease in 2005. Asthma deaths are expected to increase by almost 20% in the next 10 years if urgent actions to curb climate change and prepare for its consequences are not taken.

Another outcome of global warming is likely to be rising sea levels which will lead to increased risks of coastal flooding. More than half of the world's population now lives within 60 kilometres of shorelines. Some of the most vulnerable regions are the Nile delta in Egypt, the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta in Bangladesh, and small island nations such as the Maldives in the Indian Ocean. Floods cause injury and death and increase risks of infection from water-borne diseases.

Changes in rainfall patterns are likely to affect fresh water supplies. Globally, water scarcity already affects four out of every 10 people. A lack of water and poor water quality can cause hygiene and health problems. This increases the risk of diarrhoea, which kills approximately 1.8 million people every year, as well as trachoma (an eye infection that can lead to blindness – see [case study](#)). Crop yields are also expected to be affected by climate change, particularly in tropical developing countries, where food security is already a problem. Mali is a good example where the percentage of the population at risk of hunger and associated health effects is likely to double by 2050.

Steps to reduce the global carbon footprint could have positive health effects. For example, promoting the use of walking and cycling could reduce carbon emissions and improve public health.

### **Health and human rights**

Health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being, and every country in the world is now signed up to at least one human rights treaty that addresses health-related rights.

There is a clear link between health and human rights. For example, when basic human rights are ignored through practices such as slavery, torture or violence against women and children, there can be serious health consequences for the individuals affected. Equally, the chances of ill-health can be reduced by taking steps to respect, protect and fulfill human rights by for example enabling equal rights to health, food and nutrition irrespective of race, sex and gender etc.

Many of the rights enshrined under the Convention on the Rights of the Child relate either directly or indirectly to health. Article 6 for example, states that all children have the right to life and to survive and develop healthily. Article 24 specifically relates to health and states that all children have the right to good quality health care, clean water, nutritious food and a clean environment. This article also outlines the responsibility that richer countries have towards poorer countries in helping to achieve good health. Article 27 refers to the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet physical and mental needs, including physical and mental health. Article 32 makes governments responsible for protecting children from any work that might harm health and Article 33 relates to protecting children from dangerous drugs.

For further information on the Convention on the Rights of the Child [click here](#)

### **Millennium Development Goals**

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were agreed at the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000 and nearly 190 countries have signed up to them. The goals are international targets for reducing global poverty. They aim to lift around 500 million people out of poverty by the year 2015. If this happens, fewer women will die in childbirth, fewer people will die from treatable diseases, many more boys and girls will go to school and the lives of millions of people will improve dramatically.

Health is probably the most important issue when it comes to achieving the MDGs. Three of the eight goals and eight of the 18 targets are directly related to health.

Goal 4 relates directly to child health with a target of reducing by two thirds the death rate among children under five. The main illnesses that kill children under five are HIV/AIDS, malaria, diarrhoea and pneumonia. No region of the developing world is currently on track to meet the target of reducing child deaths. However, there is some good news: there has been a large increase in the use of mosquito nets which protect children being bitten at night by malaria carrying mosquitoes and deaths from measles fell from over 750,000 in 2000 to less than 250,000 in 2006 and about 80 per cent of children in developing countries now receive a measles vaccine.

Goal 5 relates to [maternal health](#) (already in glossary see Women's Rights) with a target to reduce by three quarters the number of women who die as a result of giving birth to a child. The proportion of

women who have help from a skilled medical person when they give birth has increased in some regions, especially Asia but overall the targets on maternal health look like they will be difficult to achieve. Countries where there is a high death rate among pregnant women are showing little or no improvement.

Goal 6 relates to combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other serious diseases with targets on stopping the spread of such diseases and providing treatment to all those who need it. Progress here has been slow but seems to be moving in the right direction: The number of deaths from AIDS fell from 2.2 million in 2005 to 2 million in 2007, and the number of people newly infected declined from 3 million in 2001 to 2.7 million in 2007.

For more information on the Millennium Development Goals [click here](#)

### **Putting your foot down:**

As young people account for almost 45% of all new HIV infections and an estimated 5.5 million young people currently live with HIV, here is an issue that all young people can and should be concerned about. Global leaders have promised universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support by 2010 and young people can take the lead to make sure this promise becomes a reality. You can join the [World Aids Campaign](#) that campaigns to hold world leaders accountable to their promises on HIV and AIDS.

You can also encourage your school to mark [World Aids Day](#) with a series of events and activities. On this day, held in December each year, people from around the world unite to raise awareness and show commitment to "Stop AIDS. Keep the Promise." It is the perfect opportunity for young people to join together to organise activities that draw attention to the needs of other young people around the world.

HIV/AIDS is of course just one health area where you can put your foot down for change, but it is a crucial one that affects millions of young people and children in the world today, either directly or because someone they know or love has HIV/AIDS.

### **Case studies**

[Bangladesh](#) – current page on the GF website

[A quiet disease](#) – current case study on GF website

### **Learn more**

→ For more information about the health footprint download our Global Footprints leaflet [click here](#) (link to pdf download)

### **→ Links:**

'10 facts' from the World Health Organisation (WHO) – A series of slide shows on different issues with useful facts and figures:

[10 facts about children's health](#)

[10 facts about health and the environment](#)

[10 facts on maternal health](#)

[Click here](#) for the full list of fact files available from WHO

[One World Guide: HIV/AIDS](#) – in depth guide to the impacts of the disease which looks at the MDGs, the affects on women and children and ways forward in prevention and treatment.

### **Glossary**

**Human biology:** in health terms, how the biological or genetic make-up of individuals or communities affects or is likely to affect their health, e.g. their likelihood of catching particular illnesses and diseases etc.

**Obesity:** extremely overweight and weighing more than 20% (for men) or 25% (for women) over their ideal weight determined by height and build.