Governance for planetary health and sustainable development

The landmark report of The Rockefeller Foundation–Lancet Commission on Planetary Health is a clear and compelling articulation of the inextricable link between human health and environmental change. The report explores an array of complex, interlinked elements of concern, from environmental tipping points to the impacts of invasive species and the importance of protected areas. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) recognises planetary health as critical to achieving sustainable development across the economic, social, and environmental spheres.

The Commission’s report comes at an important time. It is released just before the United Nations General Assembly is due to adopt the post-2015 development agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is just one of three major global processes in 2015 on disaster risk reduction, financing for development, and climate change—the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction took place in March, followed by the Third International Conference on Financing for Development in July, with the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to be held in December. Agreements in all these areas should encourage UN entities to “strengthen their collaborative mechanisms to ensure optimum coherence in tackling the threats to planetary health”, as The Rockefeller Foundation–Lancet Commission on Planetary Health notes. Indeed, decision making and accountability at international and national levels would be enhanced by following through on the recommendations of the Commission.

Implementing the Commission’s comprehensive action framework to safeguard planetary and human health requires strengthening resilience and governance capacity. This objective is reflected in the proposed SDGs. Individual, community, and institutional strengths must be built on to prevent, mitigate the effects of, and learn from threats to our civilisation and planet of any type—internal or external, natural or man-made, economic, health-related, political, or social. Strengthened resilience to such challenges needs improved governance capacities for implementing long-term, innovative, and multi-sectoral risk reduction. Public institutions will need to become more effective, accountable, and responsive to the needs of all, especially the poorest and most vulnerable.

The Commission highlights multiple influences on planetary and human health, many of which relate to governance, including international trade and domestic policies that have an adverse effect on human and environmental health. Whole of government approaches can build countries’ capacity to participate effectively in bilateral and multilateral trade negotiations to advance social, economic, and environmental interests together.

Strong intersectoral governance helps policy makers understand how economic, social, and environmental policies jointly impact on health, and vice versa. Trade-related laws and policies, combined with domestic tax regimes and regulation, can serve to maintain access to quality, affordable health technologies, or disincentive demand for alcohol, tobacco, refined sugars, and ultra-processed foods. As the Commission points out, these products harm the health of the planet and its people. Their production results in higher greenhouse gas emissions, land use change, and agrochemical pollution. There is a large opportunity for progress in this area. In 2013, only 3% of countries had taxes on high-fat foods. Conversely, the International Monetary Fund estimates that fossil fuel industry subsidies in 2015 amount to US$5.3 trillion.

Another governance priority is to encourage the private sector to protect the environment and human health as part of doing business. Private sector enterprise and
economic growth need not come at the cost of the environment and public health. UNDP’s work to integrate HIV and gender-related issues into environmental impact assessments of large-scale capital projects in 14 countries in sub-Saharan Africa is an example of how economic and social objectives can be integrated into business design.\(^5\)

Future work will address malaria prevention and control and non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Given the links between inequities, poor health, and development, making capital projects health-sensitive and ensuring that their benefits are accrued by all can advance inclusive economic growth and sustainable human development.

The recent outbreak of Ebola virus disease in west Africa, which the Commission cites as a powerful example of the immediate and alarming health effects of environmental changes, is a powerful reminder of the weaknesses of siloed, sector-based governance. Strengthening systems for health and decentralised governance is essential to build resilient communities and prevent and mitigate the impact of health crises. Future responses to health and other crisis must invest more in supporting communities as agents for response and recovery, while engaging other sectors such as communications, banking,\(^6\) and transport.

UNDP is playing its part in these endeavours. Since 2010, we have helped more than 150 countries to scale up climate change adaptation; manage ecosystems and biodiversity; improve water and oceans’ governance; introduce affordable, accessible, and clean energy solutions; and manage chemicals and waste sustainably.\(^7\)

In all of its work, UNDP believes that empowering communities to identify solutions and scale up local innovations is an effective way of supporting improved health and sustainable development. In Sudan, for example, UNDP is helping communities to address climate risks and food security. Incomes among the 20 000 beneficiaries in one initiative—more than half in women-headed households—have increased by 20%, helping to improve education and health outcomes and natural resource stewardship in their communities.\(^8\)

The report of The Rockefeller Foundation–Lancet Commission on Planetary Health reminds us that sustainable development requires holistic approaches. Advancing social, economic, and environmental goals together—underpinned by resilient systems and improved governance—is at the heart of the proposed new SDGs and UNDP’s work. Now is the time to act for the future health of all people and our planet.

Helen Clark
United Nations Development Programme, New York, NY 10017, USA
helen.clark@undp.org

I am Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme. I have no competing interests.


