



Rio +20 Health Cluster Statement

In many respects, the commitments to health articulated within the Rio+20 Outcomes Document represent a positive reaffirmation and strengthening of the importance of health as an integral component of the three pillars of sustainable development (i.e., social, economic, and environmental) and, overall, the health commitments are considered to be a positive development from the vantage of the global health advocacy community. The Rio+20 Outcomes document, for example, reaffirms a commitment to health equity and health system strengthening and articulates a fairly holistic conception of health and wellbeing that encompasses a variety of established and emergent health priorities. However, these gains are tempered by grave concerns among health advocates regarding the overall weakness of the document for addressing urgent environmental and sustainable development concerns in a decisive and comprehensive manner, thereby undermining potential gains for global health.

The health community had high expectations of Rio +20. Health was a common theme in many submissions to the first draft of this process. When the secretariat summarized the 677 submissions received by the Nov 1 2011 deadline, health and wellbeing was identified by the Stakeholder Forum as the most frequent topic brought up in submissions. Health was uniformly mentioned across all groups as a major priority in 'The Future We Want'. Indeed, some groups excluded health not because they thought it was unimportant, but because they assumed that health would be brought up universally by other stakeholders and thus decided to focus on concerns unique to their constituency.

Unfortunately, despite this broad commitment to health, there were only two references to health in the entire Zero Draft document produced by the Secretariat in January of this year. This absence of health in the Zero draft was considered to be a major gap. Subsequently, NGOs internally lobbied their governments to more fully embrace and integrate health in the Rio +20 process. The WHO also displayed leadership in this area. In providing feedback to the Zero draft, many stakeholders emphasized the core relevance of health to the three pillars of sustainable development.

In the next iteration of the Rio+20 text, health was given a dedicated section elevating its role to one of the core or priority themes essential to "The Future We Want". Additionally, there were several references to health scattered throughout the text highlighting its integral nature to various sustainable development priorities. During the subsequent Preparatory Committee sessions where the text was negotiated, the importance of health and the specific health priorities identified were among the issues with the strongest consensus and the least controversial aspects of the text, especially compared to the contentious issues negotiated elsewhere, including gender rights, means of implementation and technology transfer.

The paragraph on reproductive health was an exception, with one particular state consistent with their disagreement with any commitment to reproductive and sexual health in relation to sustainable development, despite prior commitments to these issues in global sustainable development agreements. The first text produced under Brazilian chairmanship maintained the

reference to reproductive rights, however after subsequent consultations; the reference to reproductive rights was removed, to broad condemnation from many member states, civil society organizations, and other actors.

The final health chapter has several paragraphs covering key thematic health issues, laid out as follows:

- Recognition that health is a *“precondition of, an indicator for, and an outcome of sustainable development”*
- Recognition of the importance of universal health coverage
- Strengthening the fight against communicable diseases
- Acknowledgment that the global burden and threat of Non-communicable diseases constitutes one of the major challenges for sustainable development in the twenty-first century.
- In the line with the UN Political declaration of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs) in September 2011, commitment to strengthening prevention, treatment and care for NCDs and establishing multisectoral policies for NCD prevention and control.
- Recognition that reducing pollution has positive effects on health
- Reaffirming previous trade commitments, including TRIPS, the Doha Declaration and the WTO General Council decision from 2004
- A call to strengthen health systems, acknowledging the leadership role of the WHO
- A call for the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action & the ICPD Program of Action, emphasizing the need for universal access to reproductive health & the integration of reproductive health in national strategies & programs.
- Finally, there is a commitment to reduce maternal and child mortality and an acknowledgment of the importance of comprehensive access to modern methods of family planning.

In summary, this text represents a real integration of the pillars of sustainable development, and health has been portrayed as an essential precondition and indicator of sustainable development. From having no real emphasis on health in the Zero draft, thanks to the commitment of member states, non-governmental organizations and the leadership of the WHO, we now have a dedicated health chapter, and health has been referred to in several paragraphs pertaining to sustainable development, indicating a strengthened commitment to a integrated and holistic conception of health and wellness that builds upon existing global health, environmental, social, and economic commitments.



However, a great deal remains to be done. Ideally, health would have been more fully integrated as a cross cutting issue throughout the text, with a dedicated commitment to using health indicators as a core measurement of sustainable development. Furthermore, although there is broad mention of the key health themes in the text, there is a lack of specific targets and time frames.

While health issues were integrated in the declaration, the lack of progress on critical sustainable development issues from the Rio+20 process, as well as the lack of vision and the absence of significant commitments, is of great concern. Rio+20 was a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape the future we want for our children and future inhabitants of this planet, however, the final declaration failed to adequately address the central and urgent dilemma of protecting the environment while encouraging human development and growth. The Rio+20 declaration lacks ambition, commitment and respect for our future generations. It fails to promote human rights and inter-generational justice.

According to a 2006 WHO report, an estimated one-quarter of all global death and disability (24% of the disease burden, and 23% of global deaths) are due to environmental factors, with 36% of the disease burden in children attributed to environmental factors. Given these important links between environmental factors and health as well as the critical links between health and poverty, the absence of stronger commitments to pressing environmental and sustainable development issues and the overall limitations of the final Outcomes Document undermine the positive aspects of Rio+20 for global health outlined above.

What has been achieved, and what we are yet to achieve, must not be lost in the process to translate the Rio+20 text into concrete goals and action. We must maintain our momentum. There are some hopes on the provisions for the drafting of global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), although the process for doing so is unclear. The process for determining SDGs has been referred to a working group, and we as a health community, must come together and draw on our collective expertise to clearly identify quantitative health indicators and advocate for their inclusion in the SDG process and ensure that specific health indicators developed are appropriate and effective to drive a more integrated and holistic conception of health and wellness.

Health and sustainable development are intimately interconnected- environmentally problematic forms of development can have important health implications, while the failure to adequately address pressing health issues undermines sustainable development efforts. The challenge now is to move our governments and institutions toward demanding new thinking. We must also motivate the grassroots and consider creating a new mechanism to represent the interest of future generations in sustainability and climate negotiations that promote health and equity.