

**Panel discussion on "Globalization and Health"  
24 October 2008**

Background Document

The impact of globalization on health is complex, but it is clear that, with globalization, health has become increasingly a key consideration in foreign policy, well beyond its historical place as a "mere humanitarian" endeavour subordinate to the national interests of survival, security, power, and influence.

Globalization has forced policy makers to confront the realities of an epidemiologically interdependent world and the complexities of the global cooperation needed to protect and promote public health. The worsening of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, threats from emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases such as SARS and avian influenza, fears about bioterrorism, and controversies involving trade and health (e.g. TRIPS and access to medicines) have forced foreign policy makers to grapple with issues and principles of public health.

In order to craft health policy today, governments must find mechanisms to manage health risks that spill into and out of every country. Even though much of what affects health today is transnational in nature, countries remain core actors that must reorient their health and foreign policies in ways that align their national interests with the diplomatic, epidemiological and ethical realities of a globalized world. This alignment involves governments adjusting to globalization by overcoming fragmented policy competencies in national governance systems.

Even national health systems, which remain largely national in terms of service delivery, training and regulation, the impact of globalization can be seen through the migration of health professionals and the transborder provision of health care. A lack of trained health care workers has become a crisis in many developing countries, largely due to migration to countries with more attractive salaries and working and living conditions.

Although developed and developing countries alike are affected by globalization and its impact on health and development, as usual developing countries feel the negative impact much more than developed countries. The poorest populations are also the most vulnerable to the effects of an unhealthy environment, a lack of social services, and inadequate infrastructure.

The health effects of globalization and development are not limited to infectious diseases. Urbanization brings additional environmental health challenges. Changes in diet and physical activity that accompany economic development and urbanization too

often result in higher risks of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and other non-communicable diseases.

On the other hand, globalization brings opportunities for improving health. Information and communication technology offers enormous potential that can be harnessed for efforts to improve health. Improving education, especially of girls and women, has been shown repeatedly to be linked to improved health.

The only truly effective approach to improving health in a globalized world is one that involves all of the sectors and actors implicated in the causes and effects of health outcomes. A recent report from the Commission on Social Determinants of Health has again confirmed the links between poverty, education, employment, status of women, and health. The Commission on Macroeconomics and Health provided much information on the links between economic development and health. The recent renewal and adaptation of the principles of Primary Health Care highlights the continuing importance of the values and ethics that underlie this approach so boldly put forward 30 years ago. Health is not only a personal issue, or only a family or community issue, or even just a national issue, it is a complex global challenge that needs the active involvement of the full range of global and national actors. The best ways to achieve this can be identified only when all of the key stakeholders are involved in the discussion and action.

## **Issues:**

### *Managing health risks*

- How can we ensure the involvement of all actors and sectors given the links between poverty, education, employment, status of women and health?
- What are the key health issues that must be addressed through foreign policy?
- What role can technology play in improving health services?
- What are the trends in trans-border provision of health care and how can it effectively complement the provision of national health services?
- What are the major concerns regarding the migration of health professionals and how could they be addressed?
- How can we coordinate our efforts to avoid duplication of efforts and resource allocation and promote coherence across various disease-related health initiatives and programmes?