



# World Federation of Public Health Associations

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## Public Health and Globalization

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Public health is more than ever before a global issue. Rapid advances in communications and travel and an increasingly integrated global economy are defining new public health challenges and reviving earlier ones. Following its Call to Action, the World Federation of Public Health Associations recognises the complexity of globalisation and health and asserts its important role in clarifying the nature of the challenge and in defining appropriate actions.

### The Meaning of Globalisation

Globalisation is extensively debated, but lack of agreement over its meaning or its consequences means that potential advantages risk entanglement with the more harmful developments. Globalisation therefore provokes a variety of questions, such as, for example, whether prioritising economic growth generates more inequality (or less), whether the rapid diffusion of cultural forms and consumer patterns from North to South has detrimental implications for health, and whether transnational companies wield disproportional power.

For public health agencies, institutions and associations the investigation of the link between this imprecise and disputed concept is especially daunting. International economic development is thought to be associated with improving health trends, yearly reported by the World Health Organization. However, such gains are by no means evenly spread while models of economic growth advocated by enthusiasts of globalisation may not be sustainable or lead to long-term health or social benefits. Conversely, it is clear, however, that faltering economic growth in some regions (parts of former Soviet Union, sub-Saharan Africa) is strongly linked to worsening health trends, whether measured by patterns of disease, declining population longevity, or indicators of sustainable development.

The forces that might explain such reversals are by no means entirely economic, indeed economic decline may be caused by disease and sickness (e.g. in the case of HIV/AIDS) rather than the other way around. In many other parts of the world, efforts to influence the determinants of health have been hampered, in some cases, by deteriorating public health arrangements; by the emphasis given to current health care spending in the acute sector over long-term investment in public health; by the limited capacity of states and international agencies when ranged against mounting need; by the limitations on political action created by the globalisation of markets; and by lack of international agreement on a common plan of action.

Nor are the problems linked to globalisation centred solely on those nation states with historically limited resources or which encounter particular disadvantages and risks. The growing scale of international travel and trade places even well-developed national public health infrastructures under the threat of microbial importation at a time when existing defenses (e.g. antibiotics) are reaching the limits of their effectiveness. Failure to take action on some of the external costs of global economic growth, such as climate change, threatens the global health security of the entire planet.

At a time when the pace of globalisation has increased, international efforts to improve patterns of health and disease, to combat anti-health forces, and to cope with environmental risks have been extensively



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promulgated. These have ranged from the International AIDS conference in Durban, the malaria summit in Abuja, the meeting of Health and Finance Ministers on TB in Amsterdam and the Climate Summit in the Netherlands. Heads of State from developing and developed countries alike have called for stronger responses to the diseases most closely linked to poverty alongside international efforts to promote sustainable development. Within and around the World Health Organization, a number of international partnerships have been supported: Healthy Cities, and Health 21, Roll Back Malaria, Stop TB, The Tobacco Free Initiative, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, the Campaign to Eradicate Polio, and the International Partnership against AIDS in Africa, to name but a few.

## **The Role of the Public Health Movement**

Through campaigns, charters, and by other means the international community has empowered numerous international agencies and NGOs with the responsibility for taking forward action. Through its Call to Action, the World Federation of Public Health Associations has assumed the role of world leadership among NGOs centrally involved in capacity building within the public health field.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA), in direct cooperation with the agencies of the United Nations family, particularly with the World Health Organization, works to clarify areas of emerging public health risk associated with globalisation, ranging from infectious and occupational diseases to diseases which are a product of the growing world-scale of anti-health forces.

FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED that, in the light of the many known links between globalisation and health, the WFPHA urges its member associations to support actions which:

- Draw attention to international and national disparities in health that are a consequence of global economic change.
- Draw attention to the new health challenges posed by globalisation and by the failure of the international community to implement effective interventions.
- Embed sustainable development as a key principle engaging all aspects of public health activity globally and nationally.
- Work with other public health associations within and between regions to generate stronger cross-national responses to the global public health challenge.